

# Book Club Kit

# How far into the darkness will one starlet go to see her name in lights?

Set in 1960s Italy, this stylish, atmospheric debut spins a bewitching web of movieland duplicity, family secrets, and the consequences of forbidden love, as a desperately broke American actress snags the starring role in an enigmatic horror movie shooting on location in a crumbling medieval castle outside Rome . . .



**#TheWomanInTheCastello**

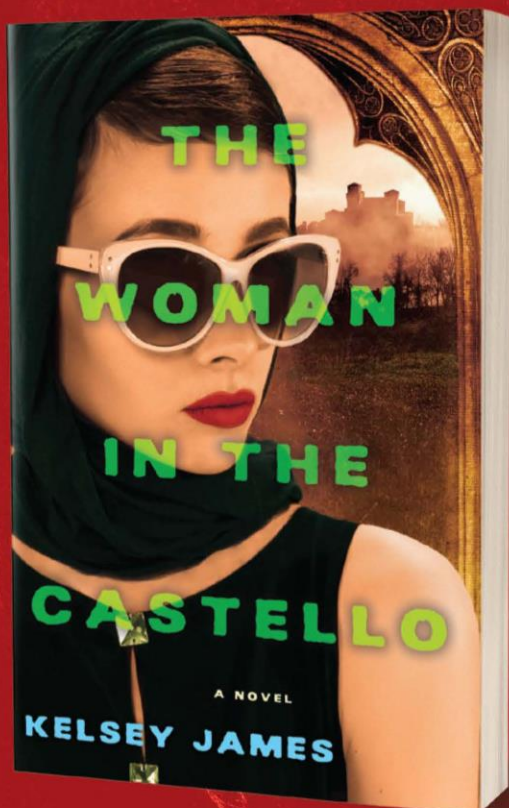
ON SALE:  
**JULY  
25  
2023**

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Cast to star in *The Revenge of the Lake Witch*, Silvia immerses herself in the part of an ingenue tormented by the ghost of her seductive ancestor. Could that be why the movie's make-believe terrors are seeping into reality? Nobody else on set shares Silvia's concerns—from the volatile director, the lecherous Hollywood icon cast as the male lead, the Italian bombshell playing the witch, or the overly-attentive makeup and costume artists. But who can she trust when they all have something to hide... **and everything to lose?**

Dear Reader,

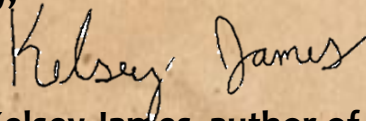
When I finished writing *The Woman in the Castello*, it was the summer of 2020 and a terrifying, relentless virus was ravaging the world around us. Among the many daily challenges, my husband and I were working from home, trying to occupy our two-year-old son while also appearing polished and professional on Zoom meetings—a circumstance that will sound familiar to many parents who raised kids during the pandemic. Like so many others, we were struggling to balance our roles as both caregivers and providers. And the struggle was about to get even more pronounced...

After Silvia, the main character in *The Woman in the Castello*, loses her job in the novel's opening pages, economic anxiety becomes a driving force behind almost all her decisions. The irony was not lost on me when, the very same morning I sent the first draft of this novel to my agent, I was laid off from my own job. I was newly pregnant with my daughter, and suddenly and dramatically without income my family depended on. I wish I could say I was as plucky as Silvia when facing my own challenges, but the truth is, like so many others that year, I went through a pretty difficult stretch.

I think one of the most important functions of art and literature is the way it can help us make sense of – or simply cope with – our present realities. The gothic and horror genres can be particularly useful during tumultuous times, as they allow us to look at reality through the prism of unreality. They grant us catharsis.

*The Woman in the Castello* is about a young actress – a single mother – who's cast in a horror movie in 1960s Italy, but at its core, it's a book about the lengths we'll go to for family. It's a book about what happens when the line between make-believe and reality begins to blur, manifesting our worst fears. It's a book about who we become on the other side. And finally, it's a book, I hope, that offers a thrilling, campy, fun escape from any challenges you may be facing in the here and now, transporting you to 1960s Italy with all its glamour, romance, and crumbling castles haunted by the past...

Warmly,



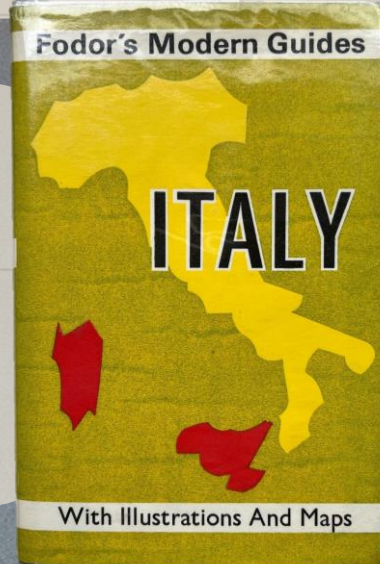
Kelsey James, author of *The Woman in the Castello*

# Additional Resources from Kelsey James

on 1960s Hollywood on the Tiber, *giallo* horror & the writing of *The Woman in the Castello...*

The research for this book was a treat. For someone who cut her teeth studying classics – piecing together the secrets of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations from obscure shards of pottery and dense academic texts – researching the 1960s felt like an embarrassment of riches. Primary sources galore!

I interviewed a family friend who grew up in Rome during the 60s. He described political brawls in the streets as a commonplace occurrence during that time – an observation that made it into the novel...



I purchased a 1963 Fodor's guidebook to see what American tourists would have read about Italy.



And there are movies to watch, of course!



*Black Sunday* (released in Italy as *La Maschera del Demonio*) was my introduction to the delightful camp of 1960s Italian horror.



*Two Weeks in Another Town* offers a glimpse of movie-making during the 1960s...



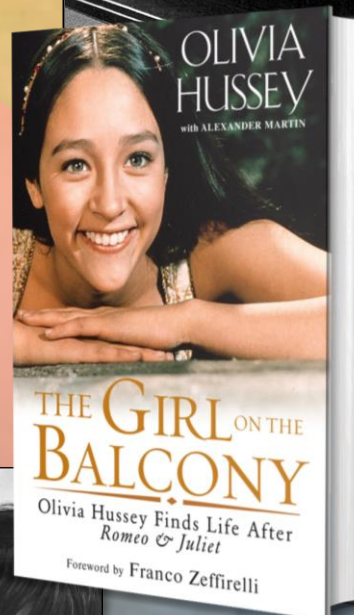
There are plenty of books to turn to as well.

Here are two of my favorites...

*My Life with Cleopatra* reveals all the drama on and off the set of the legendary 1962 production that famously became the most expensive film in history. Walter Wanger, the producer of *Cleopatra*, offers a wealth of fascinating details, including the gossip surrounding Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton's tempestuous relationship and how it fueled the Italian tabloid culture and newly minted paparazzi of the time.



Olivia Hussey's memoir, *The Girl on the Balcony*, gave me a sense of what it was like for a young actress to secure her big break in those days. One of the experiences she described became the inspiration for the scene in *The Woman in the Castello* where Lucrezia mentions the director flinging rubber bands at her head during an audition!



## A Tour of Italy with Kelsey James

I was a travel writer and editor early in my career and had the incredible good fortune to go to some truly stunning places around the world. Italy remains one of my favorite destinations—it's beloved by so many tourists for a reason!—and it was a pleasure to attempt to bring some of its wonders to life for my readers in *The Woman In the Castello*. While the town of Castello del Lago is fictional, there are a number of sights mentioned in the book that you can visit—as well as some that served as inspiration for the fictional settings, or that gothic fans may find thrilling. Take a trip with me to visit them all!



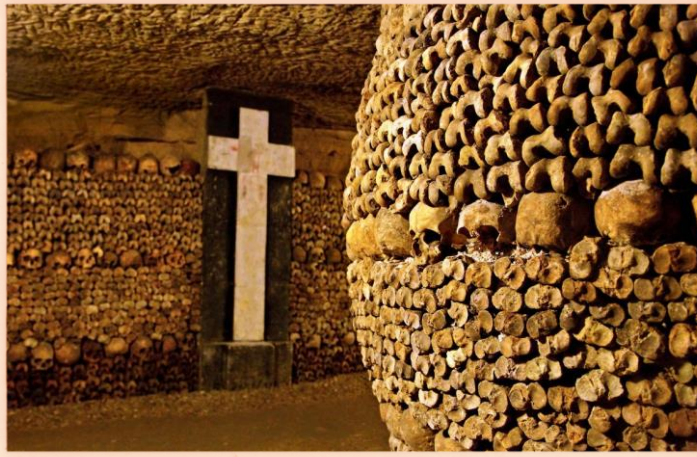
Via Veneto in Rome

In the 1960s, the Via Veneto was the place to be for well-heeled Americans traveling to Rome, and the Hotel Excelsior (still in operation today as the Westin Excelsior) was one of the city's top luxury hotels. This iconic street is still a major (and posh) tourist destination with high-end boutiques, culminating in the beautiful Villa Borghese gardens, where the heroine Silvia takes her daughter Lulu early in the book. It's near many major tourist sights such as the Spanish Steps.



The Trevi Fountain in Rome

This destination almost needs no introduction. For Silvia, it's meaningful as the spot where Anita Ekberg waded into the water in her evening dress in *La Dolce Vita*, a moment that helped make her an international icon. "The right movie, and the right scene, could do that for you, and it made this spot magic for me," Silvia thinks. The destination has become so popular that it's not particularly pleasant to visit when it's mobbed by tourists, but if you can catch it at a quieter moment it's a beautiful fountain to pause and enjoy a gelato.



## The Roman Catacombs

It will probably not come as a surprise, given my profession as a writer of gothic fiction, that I'm a fan of the macabre, and the Roman catacombs are certainly that. The Catacombs of St. Callixtus and Catacombs of St. Domitilla are some of the most famous. You won't see bones or mummies, but there are a number of fascinating examples of early Christian art.



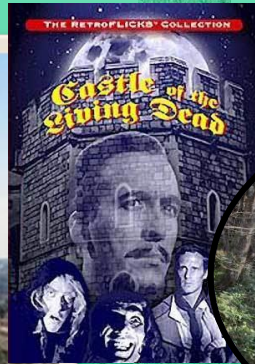
## Basilica Santa Maria del Popolo

In the book, Silvia stops here to rest her feet after a demoralizing job search. She notices some dramatic, moody paintings in one of the side chapels—and while she doesn't know who they're by, I can tell you that they're Caravaggios. One of the treats of Rome is how abundant its splendors are. You can find incredible masterpieces tucked into hidden nooks and crannies, and breathtaking monuments seemingly on every corner. Silvia observes: "Rome wore its history carelessly, its ancient churches and Roman temples and fountains as commonplace as the cats who wandered them. But I was astonished by it all."

In the novel, Gabriella's *castello* is entirely fictional, but draws inspiration from a handful of castles outside of Rome, several of which Richard mentions when they're location scouting for the movie...



Castello Orsini-Odeschalci, the lakeside castle where *The Castle of the Living Dead* was shot over the course of about a month.



Castello Massimo in Arsoli, which has beautiful hanging gardens.



Rocca Farnese in Capodimonte, with its commanding hilltop position and lake views.



Scaligero Castle of Sirmione, on the turquoise waters of Lake Garda, also sparked my imagination even though it's technically nowhere near Rome!

# Book Club Crostini

When I was younger, I loved cooking elaborate feasts for company. I still do from time to time, but with a full-time job, a second career as a novelist, and two (soon to be three) young children, they are few and far between these days. Crostini are the perfect appetizer for company when you're in a time crunch and still want to put together something fun and elevated. I think this traditional, easily shareable, Italian antipasto is perfect for summer book clubs — and I imagine Silvia might have enjoyed it at the cafe in Castello del Lago, too. Though the history of crostini is debated, everyone agrees it's been around for quite a while (hundreds or even thousands of years) and was probably a great way to use up stale old bread.

- 1 Baguette
- Olive Oil
- Salt
- (Optional) Additional toppings as desired



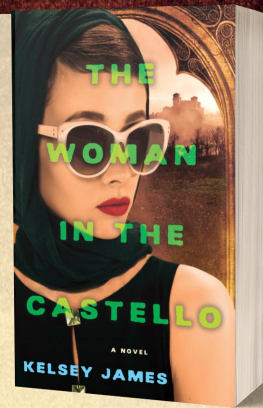
To make these, buy a high-quality baguette, slice it thinly, drizzle the bread with olive oil, and toast it in the oven.

Try a traditional bruschetta topping (garlic, chopped tomatoes, basil, olive oil, and salt) or *cavolo nero* (cooked Tuscan kale). If you're less concerned with authenticity, use whatever you like or have handy! Olive tapenade; goat cheese with honey and figs (grapes are a fine substitute!); your favorite cheeses; blue cheese and steak; and prosciutto and burrata are some of my favorite combinations.

I recommend serving a variety!

*Buon appetito!*

**Discussion Questions  
to spark conversation and enhance  
your reading of  
*THE WOMAN IN THE CASTELLO***



1. Gabriella became an actress because she wanted to be famous, while Silvia pursues acting as a means to support her family. How do you think their different motivations impacted the directions their careers took? Did you notice any other major differences or parallels between these characters?
2. Silvia is desperate for money and trapped by her circumstances when she first arrives at Castello del Lago. How might that have contributed to her perception of the town and castle? Has your emotional state ever influenced how you feel about a place?
3. Did the political polarization Silvia observed in Italy feel relatable to you? How did politics impact Silvia's family? How do they impact your own?
4. Silvia tells us: "Until now, I'd been so focused on landing parts, on scraping by, that I hadn't spared much thought for greatness." How do her feelings about fame evolve over the course of the book?
5. Herman wants Bianca's character to remain pure and virginal. Silvia, who is an unwed mother, wants Bianca to be tempted by the witch, and by her desires. Why do you think Silvia feels that way? Which version of Bianca do you like better?
6. Elements from *The Revenge of the Lake Witch* begin to seep into Silvia's reality—and vice versa. For example, Bianca is haunted by the ghost of the witch, just as Silvia seems to be haunted by the ghost from Gabriella's story. What did you think of these parallels? How did they impact your understanding of the characters and story? Were there any ways in which you found this book relatable to your own life?
7. Silvia has cut Lulu's father out of her life and relates to Gabriella falling for the wrong man—to a degree. Do you empathize with Gabriella at all?

8. Silvia tells Elena: “I’ll always put you first, Mama. You and Lulu.” In what ways does she have to sacrifice for her family? Do her personal desires and her duty ever come into conflict, and how does she handle it? How do we see this play out in her romantic relationship in the book?
9. Silvia says that we can’t vanquish our sin, but can only learn to live with it. The “right” choice isn’t always obvious for the characters in this book, and Gabriella, Elena, and Silvia all harbor regrets. Are there any decisions they made that you would have made differently? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you struggled to know what to do?
10. Elena wonders if some things are unforgivable. What do you think? Did any of the characters behave in a way that you wouldn’t have been able to forgive?
11. Fame and celebrity – the different reasons why people pursue fame, the things people do to keep it, the costs of fame, the difference between fame and infamy – play a big role in this novel. Why do you think celebrity is such an alluring subject?
12. The female characters in this novel each have very different approaches to and relationships with motherhood. Silvia is a working mother who’s torn between her career, her love life, and her need to protect and care for her daughter – competing demands that leave her racked with maternal guilt. Then there is Silvia’s own mother, who’s dying and another burden on Silvia. And there are women who have chosen not to become mothers, such as the bombshell actress and the ghostlike aunt. How are these women’s opportunities and places in society impacted by their status as mothers or childfree women?
13. Who do you think is the woman referred to in the title of this novel, *The Woman in the Castello*? Would you have chosen a different title if you were the author, and if so, what would it be?

# 5 Classics for A Scary Movie Night

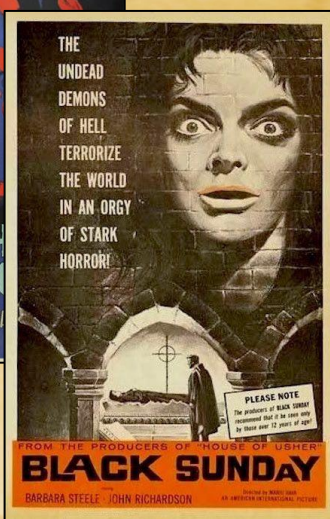
In *The Woman in the Castello*, the heroine, Silvia Whitford, gets cast as the female lead in a horror film called *The Revenge of the Lake Witch*. While you can't watch it in real life because it exists only in the world of the novel, you can see the fabulous movie poster designed by Jhonson Eteng!

There are also plenty of spine-tingling, thrilling, (occasionally a bit silly) classic horror films from the 1960s that you can watch for a creepy movie night of your own. Here are five of my recommendations – some that served as inspiration while writing the novel and others that are just personal favorites...



## BLACK SUNDAY (1960)

There's a scene in my novel where Paul, the assistant director, introduces Silvia to some of his favorite horror films. The first reel he plays is *Black Sunday*, which he says was a major inspiration behind *The Revenge of the Lake Witch*. Its opening scene features scream queen Barbara Steele in a powerful performance as a witch being executed Inquisition-style with a spiked mask nailed to her face. Released in Italy as *La Maschera del Demonio* ("the mask of the demon"), it was both wildly controversial and successful, cementing Mario Batva as one of the greatest directors of Italian horror and continuing to influence future filmmakers to this day.



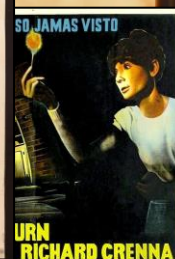
## CASTLE OF THE LIVING DEAD (1964)

This might not exactly be a great example of Italian horror, but's a cult favorite among fans of Christopher Lee and it was crucial to my research for *The Woman in the Castello*. Much like the fictional movie in my novel, it was shot on location at a lakeside castle. Filming took place on a low budget at Castello Orsini-Odescalchi, and there was enough drama on set that there still isn't a consensus as to who directed it or how long filming lasted!



## WAIT UNTIL DARK (1967)

This claustrophobic psychological suspense movie takes place almost entirely in a single apartment and Audrey Hepburn is captivating as a blind woman terrorized by criminals after accidentally coming into possession of a heroin-stuffed doll. I first watched it as part of an outdoor movie series alongside hundreds of New Yorkers sprawled on the lawn of Manhattan's Bryant Park, and were all scared out of our minds. Interestingly, when I've seen other horror movies in a similar outdoor setting, the jump scares often come across as funny and even movies like *The Shining* get a lot of laughs. Not so with *Wait Until Dark*, which proves the subtle mental terrors are often the most thrilling.



## DIAL M FOR MURDER (1954)

This is one of my favorite Hitchcock movies—the other probably being *Rear Window*. Interestingly, both—much like *Wait Until Dark*—are set almost entirely in a single apartment. Both *Wait Until Dark* and *Dial M For Murder* were adapted from stage plays. This allows these settings to become characters in themselves and significant figures in the plot. It also means these movies have to hold your attention through incredibly tight dialogue, clever plotting and satisfying twists. Grace Kelly shines in both of these Hitchcock films (although, when doesn't she?).



## THE HAUNTING (1963)

Widely considered to be one of the greatest psychological horror films ever made, the original 1963 version of *The Haunting* is a masterpiece in cinematic tension. It was also groundbreaking for its queer representation in the character of Theodora, a chic, self-possessed lesbian. Claire Bloom is terrific in this role, as is Julie Harris in the character of Nell, and there are whiffs of their on-screen dynamic in my own novel between Lucrezia and Silvia.



She's come to claim what's hers...  
**BODY and SOUL.**

# THE REVENGE OF THE LAKE WITCH

DIRECTED BY  
**HERMAN  
MEYERSON**

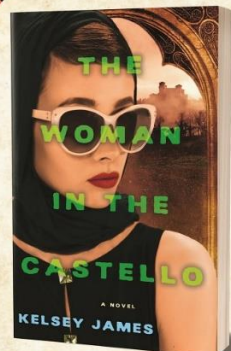
STARRING  
**TERRENCE  
LEOPOLD  
SILVIA  
WHITFORD**

AND  
**LUCREZIA  
FILEPPI**  
AS THE WITCH



IN CINEMAS 25 JULY 2023

TECHNICOLOR





**Kelsey James** is a historical fiction author, content marketer, and former travel editor. A graduate of Dartmouth College, she currently lives with her family outside New York City. *The Woman in the Castello* is her debut novel.

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