

"A DELICIOUSLY TENSE RIDE."
—RUTH WARE, bestselling author of *The It Girl*

SECLUDED CABIN SLEEPS SIX

A Novel



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LAST GIRL GHOSTED

The Best (or Worst!) Books to Read in a Secluded Cabin in the Woods by Lisa Unger



I have had significant relationships with houses throughout my life: my childhood home in New Jersey, my grandparents' row house in Brooklyn, the home I share now in Florida with my family—the place where I write every day. So, too, in my novels, homes and houses often figure prominently. They are the spaces where we choose to live our lives. Their light, their walls, their mysterious sounds and histories are part of our everyday setting. They are alive in a way—entities that demand care, that shelter us, that we adorn and love or hate, that have quirks of personality.

In my upcoming novel, ***Secluded Cabin Sleeps Six***, the space my characters occupy is a vacation rental. It's not the intimate relationship that my characters often have with the places where they reside. But the house has a dark history, a strange host and some disturbing decor. During the pandemic, I spent some time in places just like it—new, luxuriously appointed, isolated. Not haunted or scary in the least. Because I am a thriller writer and have a paranoid mind by nature, I couldn't help but wonder about the cabins we rented, the history of the land on which they were built—and was it safe to be so completely isolated in a house you didn't really *know*?

Surely if you visit a house in the woods, you won't have these same kinds of thoughts. You'll just relax, enjoy the fire and look out at the stunning view. You'll feel completely comfortable and safe—unless you read one of these books:

The Shining by Stephen King

I have yet to make a list like this and not include a Stephen King novel. There are number of his stories in which haunted places figure prominently. But none is as iconic as the Overlook Hotel. The story is probably well known to us all: Jack Torrance, a down-on-his-luck writer, brings his wife Wendy and young son Danny to the isolated hotel after accepting a job as the winter caretaker. What I love the most about the Overlook is that it's not *just* haunted; it's a predator, drawing a particular kind of prey through magic. Psychic Danny, alcoholic Jack and the abused Wendy all have wildly different experiences with the hotel and its ghosts, and only one of them becomes its agent of destruction. Save this for your winter rental, when it's snowing outside and the wind is wailing.

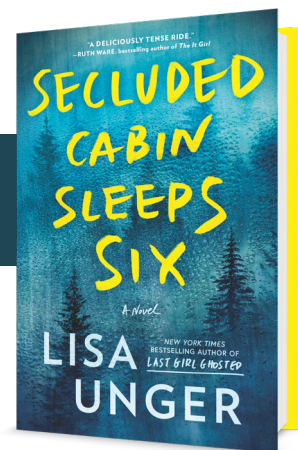
Beloved by Toni Morrison

All the best hauntings are personal. And so it is for Sethe at 124 Bluestone Road in Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. In Sethe's case, her house is haunted by the angry ghost of the daughter she killed in an attempt to save her from a life of slavery. Through flashbacks and monologues, Morrison uses imagery and evocative language to paint a searing portrait of the insidious legacy of slavery and the haunting of trauma and horrific memories. It's beautiful and painful all at once. I suggest this one for a sweltering visit to the South when the moon is full, the leaves are whispering in the breeze and maybe some branches are tapping at your window.

Mexican Gothic by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Noemi Taboada receives a frantic note from her newlywed cousin, who fears that her new husband is trying to murder her. Noemi, a smart, intrepid, glamorous young socialite, heads out right away to save her. At first, Noemi is not intimidated by the creepy High Place, or its nasty patriarch, or even her cousin's unpleasant new husband. She doesn't plan to stay long. She'll just collect her cousin and be on her way. But High Place has other ideas. Slowly, inexorably, the house, with its terrible secrets and ugly history, gets its hooks into her, and the longer she stays, the harder it becomes to leave. Maybe bring this one to the gothic mansion rental you have coming up. What was that noise in the attic?

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The Long Weekend by Gilly Macmillan

Three women arrive at Dark Fell Barn in the English countryside for a girls' night ahead of their husbands' arrival the next day. All of them are hauling lots of baggage in the forms of secrets, lies and hidden resentments. Things get off to a rocky start when the welcome gift includes a note claiming that one of their husbands has been murdered. What I love most about Macmillan's atmospheric thriller is the deep characterizations of each woman, the total sense of isolation she creates and the mysterious property on which Dark Fell Barn sits, which clearly has a history of its own. Save this one for your next visit to the moors, where there's a strange light blinking off in the distance, and was that a howl?

The Turn of the Key by Ruth Ware

Inspired by the Henry James novel *The Turn of the Screw*, Ware puts her own twist on a classic tale. When a young woman lands her dream job as a nanny at the Scottish Highlands estate of a wealthy architect, she's desperate enough for the position that she ignores the tearful warning of one of her charges that "the ghosts" won't be happy about her arrival. I love how Ware explores the "smart house" system named Happy, and all its high-tech foibles, then juxtaposes that modern set piece with good old-fashioned superstitious dread and thumping haunted-house noises. You might save this one for late at night after you're sure you've checked for surveillance cameras in your vacation rental.

The Overnight Guest by Heather Gudenkauf

True crime writer Wylie Stark retreats to an isolated farmhouse to finish her new book. It might be the perfect escape except that decades earlier, two people were murdered there in cold blood, and a young girl disappeared without a trace. When a snowstorm bears down, Wylie finds herself snowed in. And if that wasn't enough, she discovers a lost child out in the blizzard. Gudenkauf weaves a tight and twisty double narrative, character-rich and full of suspense and surprises. Here, the house is both shelter and a prison for long-buried secrets. And Wylie is the one who is truly haunted. This one is perfect for reading by the fire after you've listened to your favorite true crime podcast. But if you hear someone knocking at the door, don't answer!

My book:

SECLUDED CABIN SLEEPS SIX

Park Row

November 8

All info: <https://lisaunger.com/books/secluded-cabin-sleeps-six/>

Links:

Visit my website for more info about all my books: lisaunger.com

Ask questions and interact with me in real time on social media:

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Discussion Guide

BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. In the prologue, a Secret Santa leaves a DNA-testing kit for Hannah and her family. Everyone has a different reaction and opinion about the gift. Discuss each character's reaction and what it might say about them.
2. It's clear as Hannah and Bruce are heading out to the weekend getaway with Mako, Liza, Cricket and her new boyfriend, that there are already tensions and complicated dynamics at play between members of the group. What did you pick up on right away?
3. At first, Henry's story seems to be unconnected to the crew that's traveling to the remote cabin. Did you have early thoughts on who Henry might be and how he fits into the story? How did they evolve as the story unfolded?
4. There are shifting perspectives on the group gathering inside the cabin. We see them close up through Hannah's eyes, from just outside the cabin through the point of view of a malicious stranger, and from an even farther distance through Bracken's cameras. What do we learn from each perspective—about the watchers and the watched?
5. At the dinner, Chef Jeff shares the dark history of the house the family is renting. How did you feel about the cabin before and after?
6. What did you make of the use of bone in the decor of the house? The statues upstairs, the chandeliers and the bone sculpture in the dining room?
7. Chef Jeff brings up the concept of "memento mori." Were you familiar with this phrase? What does it mean to you? How does Hannah feel about it?
8. Hannah, her brother Mako and their longtime family friend Cricket have a complicated relationship. Discuss how each relates to the other. What role does each person play in the group?
9. Have you ever used a vacation rental service like the one in the book? What has your experience been? Do you know of any horror stories? Having now read this novel, will you think twice next time you plan to take a trip?
10. Do you know anyone who has taken a DNA test before and had surprising results? If you haven't taken one, would you ever consider it? Why or why not?

THE SECLUDED CABIN DRINK RECIPE

In short glass with ice mix:

2 OZ Blanton's Bourbon

1 OZ Fever Tree Ginger Beer

**3 Drops Angostura
Orange Bitters**

1 Orange Peel



Why Can't I Go on Vacation Like a Normal Person? by Lisa Unger

"No matter where you go, there you are."
The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension



I'd like to go on vacation. I really would. Here's what I imagine: You fly in luxury and comfort to someplace gorgeous. You lie around, get pampered. Mentally, you're free as a bird, not a worry or a care in the world. You sleep as long as you like. Eat what you want. Drink. Of course, you drink. You just lie back on some comfy lounge and relax in a total state of bliss. That's what vacation is, right?

I have never had a vacation like this.

Mainly because I have to bring myself with me.

When I was a kid and told my dad (an engineer) that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, he was very clear that this was a terrible idea. Writing, he asserted, is not a job. As my twentieth novel is about to publish, and I have been a full-time professional writer for more than twenty-three years, I am here to tell you that he was correct. Writing is not a job. It's a calling. It's a vocation (not to be confused with "vacation"). Most writers are born and not made. Our minds work a certain way. And, at least in my case, it never stops working that way, even when I'm supposed to be relaxing.

I'm just going to say it. I don't get *relaxing*. I mean—what is it? I understand presence and meditation. That I can do. But just lying around and having someone hand you a mai tai on a tray while you soak up the rays in your new bathing suit—my brain can't handle it. It's always going to create a story, and a dark one at that. While other people are enjoying their downtime—I'm thinking about tsunamis, and how my daughter could be abducted, and who is that creepy guy and what the heck is he looking at, and where are the exits? It's not just an occupational hazard. My brain has always worked this way to begin with. It's, in fact, probably *why* I write thrillers.

When I was growing up, I don't think my family ever really took a vacation. We traveled. The early part of my life was spent in England and the Netherlands, and so we traveled around Europe, visiting museums, castles, churches and places of historical interest. There were no resorts or amusement parks, no luxury hotels. Back in the U.S., my father's idea of a fun trip was to visit Civil War sites and tour battlefields, asking endless questions while we stood on a simmering field in the blazing heat of summer. Gettysburg sticks in my mind. He also liked feats of engineering like bridges, dams and aqueducts. Lots of questions about those, too. Maybe once we went to the Jersey Shore. Still, I don't recall chilling on the beach. I think I watched *The Exorcist* on the motel television and was essentially scarred for life. Why my parents thought it was okay for me to watch it is not clear. My mother, it should be noted, has no memory of this.

All I'm saying is that good vacationing was not modeled for me as a child.

None of this changed when I met my husband, an adrenaline junkie and an adventure-travel enthusiast. Here are just a few of the things we've done: We trekked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, floated down the Amazon River, canopy-walked in Costa Rica, rafted down the Rio Grande, lava-tubed in Iceland. Let me just say this about our "vacations": when I come home, I am happy to be alive and I vow to never travel again. Of course, I do travel again. And again. Because—the world.

Recently we went to the Azores. I know. Where are the Azores? I'm not telling you because I don't want you to go there. It's that nice. This is the closest I have come to relaxing on vacation—lots of spa treatments. Until. We were headed to hike the rim of a volcanic lake—because of course there was a volcano. But it was raining so hard that we had to turn back. On our way out, we came across an abandoned hotel. The dark, towering behemoth was covered in graffiti and surrounded by multiple signs like *PERIGO* (that's DANGER, btw) and other obvious Portuguese warnings like NA ENTRE, clear in any language to STAY OUT. So, of course we parked the car and decided to go in. Not my finest parenting hour. I wonder what our daughter will remember about her "vacations."

Why Can't I Go on Vacation Like a Normal Person? by Lisa Unger



Photo Credit: Jay Nolan

During the pandemic, we decided to take a socially distanced vacation to Blue Ridge, Georgia. We rented a gorgeous cabin, and intended to hike, cook and just chill. When we arrived, we were awed by the natural beauty of this part of the country, and blissfully hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail. We brought our groceries from home, cooked, made a fire in the fire pit and roasted marshmallows to make s'mores. Sounds nice, right?

It was.

Except.

I just couldn't stop wondering about the door locks. The code—did everyone who rented the cabin get the same entry code? Or was it changed every time? When I was sitting alone on the porch in front of the outdoor fireplace (gorgeous—relaxing for anyone else), a bearded older man, with a head of long gray hair and baseball cap, rode up the drive in a Gator and informed me that sometimes he “looked in” on the property for the owners. “That’s nice,” I said. “Thanks for dropping by.” He drove off without another word. I thought about that old guy—a lot. And wondered what he’d meant exactly by “looking in.” The place was much bigger than we needed because it was the only cabin left the week we wanted to rent—and my daughter’s room was a little too far from ours. And it was quiet. And it was really, really dark—no other houses around for miles. Exactly what we wanted. A secluded cabin. It actually slept more than six. It was more like eight. You see where I am going with this, right?

And it got me to thinking—at 3:00 a.m.—about this whole vacation rental thing that we’re all so into these days. And the prevalence of security cameras and how everybody has them now. And how even the most sophisticated surveillance equipment—visual and audio—is very cheap, and some of those cameras are so small. (Go ahead. Look it up.) You could really put them anywhere and the people you were watching would never know. Unless they were totally paranoid and looked around, and maybe if you did a good job, not even then. But who would do that? Who would look for cameras in a gorgeous luxury vacation rental? Who wouldn't just kick back by the fire and read a book? Ahem.

It wasn't just that little adventure that was the inspiration for my twentieth novel, ***Secluded Cabin Sleeps Six***. A few months later, we rented another place to vacation with my extended family (Mom and Dad of *Gettysburg* and *Exorcist* fame): a stunning property with multiple structures, this time in Asheville, North Carolina. My brother, my niece and nephew, were also supposed to join, but a COVID-19 scare kept them away, and lots of drama ensued. So, as most people know—unless you're one of those weird people who actually gets along all the time with your wonderful family of origin this was not exactly a vacation, either.

My point is that instead of peaceful retreats that might have been restful for anyone else, maybe even you, they were inspiration for my twentieth novel. A thriller. About a brother and sister who take a much-needed long weekend away with their spouses, best friend and her new boyfriend. They are out in the woods, and their “host” is a little too present. And a storm is coming. Cell phone service is spotty. And there's someone lingering in the shadows with an appetite for a certain kind of justice. What could go wrong?

That's what most of my vacations are: basically fodder for my overly vivid imagination.

So maybe someday, right? Maybe one day I'll visit someplace so restful and relaxing that I won't have one single paranoid or catastrophic thought. I won't experience any personal encounters that will get me thinking about people and what they're capable of, and how crazy and out of control life can be sometimes, and how just a single choice can upend your whole existence, and—what was that noise coming from the basement?

But then what would I write about?