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The consummate summer read.”  
—THE WASHINGTON POST

“Absolutely captivating.”  
—ELIN HILDERBRAND

# LITTLE MONSTERS

A NOVEL



ADRIENNE  
BRODEUR

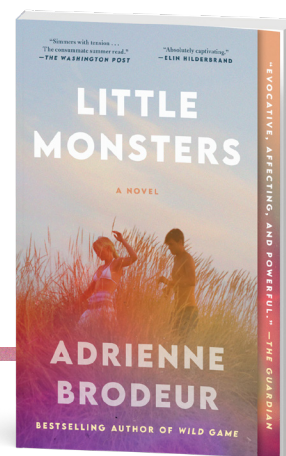
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF WILD GAME

READING GROUP GUIDE

## READING GROUP GUIDE

# LITTLE MONSTERS

BY ADRIENNE BRODEUR



This reading group guide for *Little Monsters* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Adrienne Brodeur. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

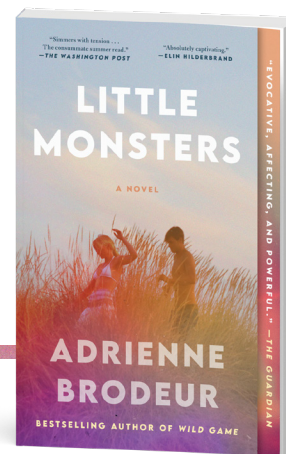
### INTRODUCTION

Adult siblings Ken and Abby Gardner hold fast to the only family narrative they know: their parents had a happy life together until their mother's untimely death, when Adam, their heroic father, stepped into the role of single parent and gave them an idyllic childhood in the Wellfleet Woods. Now, in the summer before the 2016 election, Ken is a troubled yet high-achieving businessman with his own outwardly flawless family; Abby is a talented, iconoclastic artist with a big secret; and Adam is an aging yet still fiercely ambitious patriarch who opts in to his usually medicated bipolar disorder in the hopes that mania will lead him to one last scientific breakthrough. When Ken and Abby's unknown half sister, Steph, appears on the scene, thorny truths come to light, upending the Gardner family story and detonating long-suppressed emotions. Inspired by the archetypal story of Cain and Abel, *Little Monsters* is a kaleidoscopic, propulsive, and sophisticated drama exquisite with the tension of characters careening in and out of one another's orbits, alternately sharing and withholding secrets from one another and themselves—and with Cape Cod's magnificence and hidden corners elevating every page.

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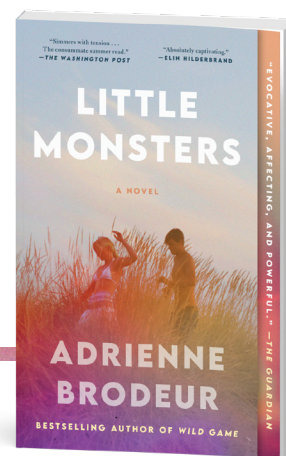
## TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Brainstorm some adjectives you would use to describe Adam, Ken, Abby, Steph, and Jenny. Do they share any words in common? What aspects of their identities create the biggest rifts and points of connection between them? Who most resonates with you?
2. Why do you think Brodeur chose to set *Little Monsters* in the summer of 2016? How does the charged political atmosphere affect the characters' relationships to each other? What would have happened if the novel took place in the summer of 2017, or the summer of 2012?
3. As Abby's best friend and Ken's wife, Jenny, is enmeshed in the Gardner family; Steph, on the other hand, is only just introducing herself to the relations she didn't know she had. Compare and contrast Jenny and Steph's arcs as they (re-)calibrate their place in this complicated family.
4. The attitude gap between the men and women of the Gardner clan regarding gender figures prominently in *Little Monsters*. Think back to when this difference results in conflict. Who did you align with in those moments? Did you find the character with whom you did not agree sympathetic in any way?
5. Steph has just had a child, Abby is pregnant, and Emily's premature death—as well as the short-lived stepmothers that succeeded her—shape the remaining Gardners in both subliminal and obvious way. What is the role of motherhood in *Little Monsters*?
6. Cape Cod—its beauty and wildness—is a core piece of the novel's fabric. What were some of your favorite descriptive lines evoking the landscape? Would this book feel different if it was set in New York or California?
7. Ken's therapy sessions and Adam's bipolar disorder are the sites of important emotional momentum in *Little Monsters*. Why do you think Brodeur chose to make mental health—specifically of the male characters—a key element of their respective characterizations?

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8. David is a more minor character, despite his intense and long-held connections to both Ken and Abby. What do you think of him, especially as another third point in a relationship triangle in which Ken and Abby find themselves? Do you think he and Abby will end up together in the end, or will they have a less conventional arrangement?
9. Why do you think Brodeur titled the novel *Little Monsters*, yet the name of Abby's painting is the singular "Little Monster"?
10. We learn the contours of Ken and Abby's childhood via flashes of memory—not all of them reliable. Point to some sentences or passages in the beginning of the novel that hint at the siblings' complex dynamic. Having finished the book, how would you characterize what happened between them when they were young? How would you characterize their relationship now—and how do you imagine it will affect the other characters in their life?

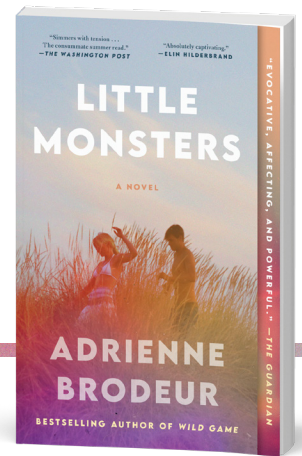
## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. As a group, come up with a list of other pieces of media that deal with entangled family bonds, gender politics, women's friendships, and childhood trauma, and discuss how these selections differ from or are similar to *Little Monsters*.
2. Be like Abby and get crafty! Paint, draw, sketch, or collage using *Little Monsters* as the inspiration—it could be a scene Brodeur explicitly includes in the novel, a memory of one of the characters, an abstract feeling a passage evoked in you, an imagined future for the Gardner family, and beyond. Bonus points if you reference some of the "comps" to which Rachel compares Abby's art when she visits Arcadia in the beginning of the novel.
3. Cast the *Little Monsters* movie or miniseries: Choose your top picks for the main roles, and make a case to the larger group about who would best embody each character.

A CONVERSATION WITH  
ADRIENNE BRODEUR

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**Your memoir *Wild Game* is largely set on Cape Cod and also deals with family secrets. What made you want to explore this territory in fiction?**

For those of you who have read my memoir, *Wild Game*, it will come as no surprise that I'm fascinated by family secrets and that they loom large in my new novel, *Little Monsters*. This obsession was no doubt informed by my own family who were prodigious secret keepers going back for generations. But of course, secret keeping is not unique to my family and makes for great storytelling, which is why it was a delight to invent a fictional family and take a kaleidoscopic look at their buried truths, and at the risks and rewards of confronting them.

As for Cape Cod, I find it an endlessly fascinating landscape. Obviously, it's a place of privilege and class—some people live there, and others summer there. But it's the natural world that most animates me. As soon as I approach the Sagamore Bridge and smell the brackish air, my heart rate slows, and my body relaxes. From its kettle ponds to its sand dunes and cranberry bogs, from its shorebirds to its migrating marine life, there is simply no place that captures my imagination quite like it. Cape Cod is essentially a large and fragile sand bar—a landscape that changes by the season but also by the hour from weather and tide, and one that is destined someday to be swallowed back into the ocean.

**What are the difficulties and benefits of writing a novel versus writing a memoir?**

**What was your writing process like?**

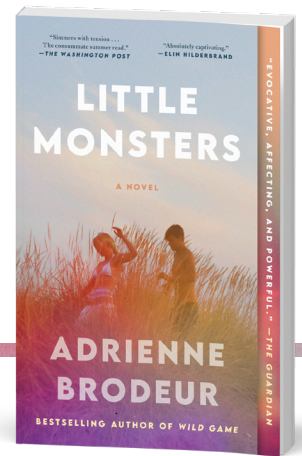
For better or for worse, you have so much more freedom writing fiction than nonfiction. With memoir, obviously, it takes skill and control to carve a narrative out of the block of stone that is your life, but all the elements are there: you know who the narrator is, and you know the story, even as you must shape it. With a novel, you start with nothing. You don't even know what material you're working with. Everything—the story, the characters, the point of view, the setting—is up to you.

Writing a book is a bit like holding something delicate and stealthy in your hands—if you hold too tight, you risk crushing it; too loose, and it might get away. *Little Monsters* started

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with a persistent curiosity about the often-fraught nature of sibling relationships, which led me to reflect upon the biblical story of Cain and Abel. That was the foundation. From there, the process is all about patience and discipline. I wake up around 5 a.m., get a big mug of coffee, go straight to my desk, and write. While it is a cliché, writing a novel is like building a plane as you fly it. I must write to get to know my characters and figure out the narrative. Aside from Adam, the patriarch, who arrived fully developed on page one, it was only through writing that the characters revealed themselves. By the end of the first draft, I knew who they were enough to go back and revise, which of course, is the process: write, edit, repeat.

### **What interests you about sibling relationships? And what spoke to you about the Biblical tale of Cain and Abel?**

Sibling relationships are compelling fodder for a novel simply because it's hard to fathom how people growing up in the same family can experience the world so differently. Also, the relationship is so ripe for both closeness and conflict. I looked to the archetypal story of Cain and Abel, hoping for answers about sibling rivalry, and was left wanting. It is truly a bare-bones story. That said, the tale informed the structure of the book in as much as Cain and Abel made offerings to God, and God favored Abel's gift. In *Little Monsters*, the narrative structure builds toward the patriarch's seventieth birthday where his children present him with gifts of great personal importance and the father favors one child's offering over the other's.

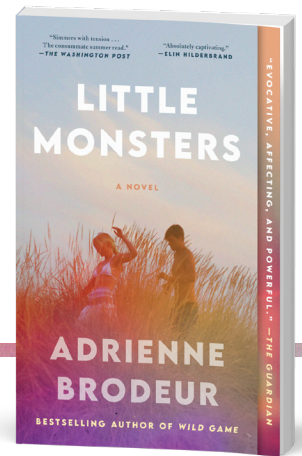
### **What made you choose to set the events of the book during this particular summer?**

I didn't start writing *Little Monsters* until the spring of 2020, but I always knew I would set the book in the months leading up to the 2016 election as I found the uneasy mood of the country riveting. It was a time when you could practically feel the ground shifting beneath your feet, although most people I know, me included, did not correctly anticipate how. I also love the subversive idea that the readers know more about what will happen next than the characters.

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There are many reasons people hide their feelings—shame and fear come to mind—and equally as many that determine why some people can stop hiding, while others go deeper underground. I’m no political historian or sociologist, but I feel sure that 2016 was a global inflection point, marking the collapsing of established social orders and creating a perfect storm of sorts, enabling some people to reckon with their history and privilege and forcing others into deeper denial.

**What media—books, films, or music—inspired you as you were developing and writing *Little Monsters*?**

There is rarely a time that I’m not absorbed in a book, listening as I take walks, or reading before bed. That said, I’m unable to point to a specific book that inspired *Little Monsters*, rather I feel indebted to all writers who’ve ever ignited my imagination and empathy, as cumulatively, they encouraged me to join the conversation. As for music, I can be very specific—every morning as I sit down to write, I put on headsets and listen to whale songs. There is something so profoundly moving about these ancient-sounding ballads that I’m almost instantly transported into a perfect state of openness to write.

**Did you find Ken and Adam’s problematic natures difficult to grapple with?**

Obviously, there are some truly evil people in the world but for the most part, I think humans are like any other animal—at their most aggressive when they’re wounded. Who hasn’t said something horrible to someone they love? As a writer, I want to portray the complex gray areas in character. I’m far less interested in heroes and villains than in what’s courageous and corrupt in all of us.

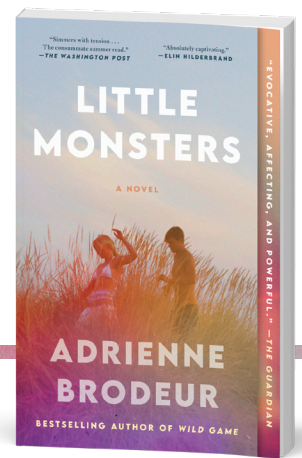
**Which of the characters in *Little Monsters* did you find easiest to write? Who would you return to in the form of a short story or novella?**

That’s easy: Adam. Adam popped into my head pretty much fully formed, demanding that he be a point-of-view character. He was sarcastic and funny, and always said things that surprised me. I pretty much just held my hands over the keyboard and let him rip. It’s something I’ve never experienced as a writer before and I hope will happen again!

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The rest of the characters took their sweet time in revealing themselves on the page, which is more typically the way it works for me. If Adam demanded more time on the page, I certainly wouldn't refuse, but I think Ken's wife, Jenny, is the character who has the most left to say.

## What do you hope readers will take away from the novel?

I hope people will find it both entertaining and thought-provoking, of course, but beyond that, I imagine everyone will take away something different based on their personal experience. The unexpected question I took away from the book was that we are all born into families and accept the terms of families without thinking we have a choice. What if you didn't?



Author Photo © Tony Luong

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ADRIENNE BRODEUR** is the author of the memoir *Wild Game*, which was selected as a Best Book of the Year by NPR and *The Washington Post* and is in development as a Netflix film. She founded the literary magazine *Zoetrope: All-Story* with Francis Ford Coppola, and currently serves as executive director of Aspen Words, a literary nonprofit and program of the Aspen Institute. She splits her time between Cambridge and Cape Cod, where she lives with her husband and children.