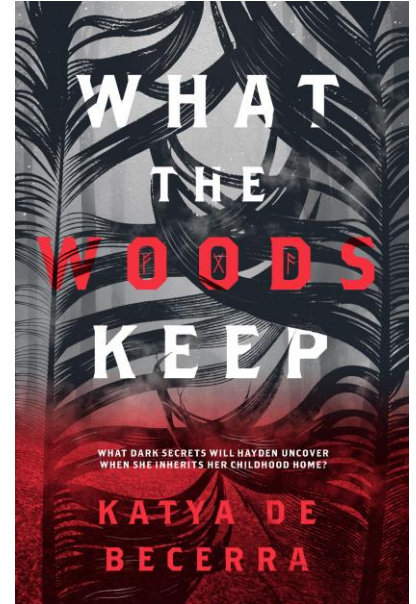


What the Woods Keep

By Katya de Becerra

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Recommended for 13-18 year olds



Summary

On her eighteenth birthday, Hayden inherits her childhood home - on the condition that she uncover its dark secrets.

Hayden has tried to put the past behind her, and so far, it's worked. She's getting ready for college, living in a Brooklyn apartment, and hanging out with her best friend and flatmate, Del. But now it's all catching up with her: her mother's mysterious disappearance a decade ago, her father's outlandish theories about a lost supernatural race, and Hayden's own dark dreams of strange symbols and rituals in the Colorado woods where she grew up.

As soon as Hayden arrives at her hometown, her friend Del in tow, it begins: neighbours whisper secrets about Hayden's mother; the boy next door is now all grown-up in a very distracting way; and Hayden feels the trees calling to her. And among them, deep in the woods, Hayden will discover something incredible - something that threatens reality itself.



'The perfect blend of science fiction, mystery and fantasy... the kind of fantasy that makes you double bolt the door before you go to bed and maybe even leave on a light or two to ward off the scary dreams. It's also got this beautiful blend of science, philosophy, psychology and even mythology—like Einstein and Stephen King got together with the author to plot this all out. A fun and creepy read.'

— Dana L. Davis, author of *Tiffany Sly Lives Here Now*

Use in the curriculum

With themes including paranormal fantasy, romance and Nibelungen legends, and a style the author characterises as 'genre-blending', *What the Woods Keep* will suit sophisticated discussion and analysis in studies of genre in literature.

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Discussion questions

1. Before reading *What the Woods Keep* ask students to consider the title and cover design. What visual techniques has the designer used? Consider font, colour, symbols and framing to create a mood for the novel to come. Compile a list of words to describe the mood that the cover evokes.
2. Define the literary term *symbolism* and explain what 'the woods' has come to symbolise in fairy tales, mythology and gothic novels. Make a list of other symbols appearing in the novel and their significance to the story.
3. 'But today, something about the Aquarium feels off...I have seen this kind of stuff before. More than once actually, and the only constant in the equation, every single time, was one and the same: me. (pp. 35-36)
What literary devices are used in this extract to build tension? Consider metaphor, simile, use of italics, imagery, short, staccato sentences.
4. (i) What effect do the various documents – legal, medical, newspaper clippings, diary entries, scientific reports – create in this novel? What are the positives and negatives of interrupting the narrative with 'found documents'?

(ii) Create your own story using 'found documents' (apart from the sort of documents used in *What the Woods Keep*, try using more common, everyday documents, such as shopping lists, photos, a typical school report, Instagram messages, etc.).
5. 'My scientific mind has always been my best (and perhaps only) defence, but when this exoskeleton grew so elaborate, hard and thick that it covered me whole, it devoured me to the point where I could no longer tell where the real Hayden ended and the made-up one began...and I'll be forced to evolve into something new and scary.' (p. 284)

Does Hayden evolve into something new and scary by the end of the novel? Compare the girl in Chapter 1 with the girl in Chapter 47.

6. Why do you think the author describes the novel as 'genre-blending'? Identify the multiple genres featured in the novel and give examples of characters or events that occur to represent each particular genre.
7. Why do you think the author chose to include the quote by Rumi at the front of the novel? How does this quote relate to Hayden and her quest to understand her mother's secrets?
8. Write a book review for *What the Woods Keep*, making sure you cover off each of the following:
 - (i) Title and author's name.
 - (ii) What genre/s feature in the book?
 - (iii) When and where does the action in the book take place? Does the author do a good job of making you feel like you are there?
 - (iv) Are the main characters believable? Does the author adequately describe them?
 - (v) What do you like or dislike about the author's writing style? Does she successfully build tension?
 - (vi) Use concrete examples to back up your points, such as describing a scene that really scared you.

Don't forget to include your opinion of the book, whether you liked or disliked it.

Author's inspiration

'*What the Woods Keep* brings together several genres, namely dark (urban) fantasy, thriller, mystery and science fiction. With this book I wanted to explore that murky area in our subconscious where logic meets belief – and where primal instincts kick in despite our best rational explanations. And blending several established genres together seemed like a perfect way to go.

'When I first started working on *What the Woods Keep*, I didn't plan to write a genre-blending book. Instead, my goals were to pay tribute to some beloved "tropes" of young adult urban fantasy (house in the woods; small town full of secrets; inheriting a dark and terrifying family legacy) and to re-interpret those tropes. Primarily, I was driven by a specific narrative voice as well as by my everlasting love for all things strange and unexplained. Thematically, I wanted to explore what happens to human nature when our familiar perception lens malfunctions and our logic clashes with a phenomenon that refuses to be understood and categorised.'

The author

Katya de Becerra wanted to be an Egyptologist when she grew up. Instead, she became a cultural anthropologist - not the type who goes away to faraway locales but the one who sticks to the urban and the familiar and attempts to view it through a stranger's lens. She immigrated to Australia in 2006, after having lived in Russia, USA and Peru, and now writes young adult fiction set in some peculiar place with a mercurial atmosphere where strange things go bump in the night.

