


BOOK CLUB KIT



# WE WENT TO THE WOODS

CAITE DOLAN-LEACH

*"Dark, gothic, and  
hauntingly beautiful,  
this is addictive  
storytelling at  
its best."*

—JP DELANEY



## A Letter from CAITE DOLAN-LEACH

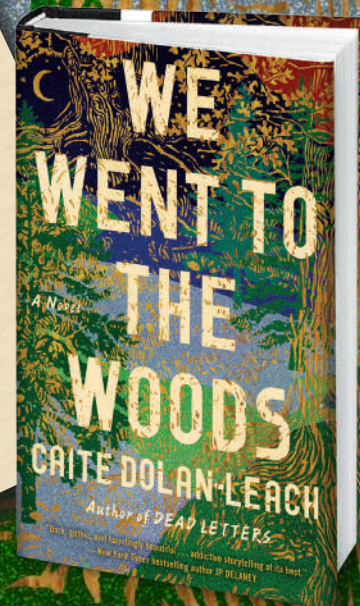
DEAR READERS,

I grew up in the woods. Though my family didn't live off-grid, my parents were hippies and my childhood was spent out of doors, bringing in wood for the fire, skinny-dipping in ponds, boiling sap. When I moved back to the town I grew up in after years of living and traveling in Europe, what I wanted was to eat vegetables grown nearby, to relearn when each season landed. My imaginative landscape felt inescapably rural, dominated by spring ramps and acres of maple.

When I began working on this book in 2016, I didn't know anyone who hadn't talked about withdrawing from the world to retreat from—and remake—society. Especially in my hometown, talk of solar panels and digging deep wells was typical, from people on both sides of the political spectrum. The election only intensified these conversations, and I suddenly found myself having a lot more sympathy for my idealistic characters. They were still foolish millennials naively striving for something impossible—but their need to try felt much more gently.

There's a long history of utopian and intentional communities in upstate New York, and the self-sufficiency and remoteness of these attempted communities feels deeply American to me. The more I got to know Mack and her crew, the more I became drawn to earlier efforts to perfect life on a small scale. I felt connected to generations of people who felt their world ending around them and did what they could to forestall doom. Though these projects were rarely (never) successful, I felt reassured by their attempts, the refusal to accept a badly made world, and I think I became seduced by the nobility of such a project. It seemed, in fact, as futile and necessary as writing and reading novels, and I hope that readers can find some shelter in this made-up world and escape, however momentarily, from our increasingly unreal one.

Caitie Dolan-Leach





1. The novel's title is based on a quote from Henry David Thoreau: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front not only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Compare this quote to Robert Louis Stevenson's refutation in the epigraph. Are all Thoreauvian ambitions naïve in our modern age?
2. At its best moments, which of the Homestead's values and tenets seem healthy and important for an individual? For a social group?
3. What are the potential threats—from within the Homestead and without—to such a communal social structure? How might these be guarded against or managed?
4. The narrative moves with the seasons, providing glimpses of bountiful summers and harsh winters. How did the outside world reflect the characters' interior states—and the story at large?
5. From the beginning, Mack, Louisa, Beau, Jack, and Chloe have different reasons for being on the Homestead. Knowing now that some members of the Homestead were self-serving in their retreat from society, do you think they were doomed from the start? Do you think their incongruous philosophies led to their downfall, or contributed to a diversified community?
6. Phrases like "late-stage capitalism," "far-right," "zombie apocalypse," and "sustainability" circulate at the dinner table—products of and reactions to our current moment. How do modern conveniences and gadgets influence our culture? How is doing and thinking for ourselves made possible (or impeded) by modern educational and cultural institutions? What would your reason be for going off the grid?
7. Throughout the story, there are confrontations between Louisa and Beau, and the Homestead and Fennel. In what ways were each of these characters successful or failed leaders? To what extent does someone's personal or private life affect his or her ability to lead? Did the concept of leadership undermine the enterprise, or was it necessary?



8. On page 199, Jack says of their project, "We do it because that other world—the world of such huge injustice and cruelty—has become unlivable. And because we have the immense privilege to try something else." In what ways are the group's radical ideas mired by their privilege and bourgeois predilections? In what ways are they ignorant?
9. How did you interpret Mack's fascination with William Fulsome's diary entries, and various characters' fascination with Transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman? Do you think these moments added to the story? Why do you think Dolan-Leach included them?
10. "I couldn't help noting the parallels with what I'd been writing about—Oneida and William, and the other communities that had collapsed for a simple reason: sex" (290). Mack seems to think there is an inherent danger in these sexually charged communities. Do you agree with her view? Why do you think there is so much power in sex?
11. The Homestead begins as a rather isolated, passive project, but as the novel progresses, its members begin to radicalize and turn to violence. Do you think it's possible to live totally removed from society—according to your own rules—or is it up to us to take action and change the world we live in?
12. Do you think that the brand of utopic socialism that intentional communities seek might ever be possible, or will human flaws and emotions always get in the way? What would your utopia look like?
13. If you read Caite Dolan-Leach's first novel, *Dead Letters*, you might have noticed a certain character makes a cameo in *We Went to the Woods*. Did you catch it? Why do you think Dolan-Leach included this character?



## SAUERKRAUT

*My “recipe” for sauerkraut is more of a method, or a guideline for experimentation. I spent a while trying to get a perfect recipe, but learned that kraut is really more of a living dish that changes quite a bit depending on all the variables (temperature, cabbage quality, type of salt, phases of the moon, etc.). Here are some of the basic things I learned while getting to know this ancient treat—but bear in mind that everyone likes their kraut differently, and it’s worth getting to know your own palate while you get to know salty old cabbage.*

1. **GET A CABBAGE.** This might be the biggest factor in how the end product turns out. I found that store-bought cabbage never turned out quite right—it goes from fresh to rancid without that interim sweet spot that is kraut. Get a cabbage from your garden, or from a CSA, or farmers market and save yourself the trouble of monkeying with a goopy mess. The classic kraut uses plain green cabbage, but go nuts! Mix in red cabbage or use a Napa or Savoy if they look beautiful.
2. **CHOP OR SHRED IT.** You can use a food processor, a cheese grater, or a knife, depending on how long you’re willing to spend and the look of what you’re trying to achieve. Shaving cabbage with a good sharp knife is my favorite prep method: the crunchy, paper-thin ribbons you end up with are so satisfying, and look the most beautiful. (A mandolin can achieve the same effect.) But I’m not above pulling out my Cuisinart if I’m short on time. Half a cabbage yields a decent amount of kraut while you’re figuring things out. Make coleslaw with the rest, or do the whole thing and make separate batches.
3. **SALT LIGHTLY.** Chuck your shredded cabbage in a bowl and toss it lightly with salt. I use sea salt of varying grains because that’s all I keep in my kitchen. That’s what I’d recommend.
4. **SQUEEZE.** Use your hands and really mess that cabbage up. Squeeze out as much juice as you can into the bowl.
5. **CROCKPOT.** Put the cabbage and its liquid into a crockpot. (I actually use my battered old Le Creuset Dutch oven.) Tamp the cabbage down so that it’s submerged in its own liquid. You can add a dollop of water to make sure it’s all covered—anything above the water line will turn brown and funky and can mess with the flavor of the rest of the batch. Put a plate and heavy stone on top of the cabbage so that the water is running over the edge of the plate and all the veggies are completely submerged.
6. **WAIT.** Put your pot somewhere cool (but not too cool) and let that fermentation get going. Everyone likes a different degree of funkiness, so I suggest letting it sit for two weeks and then tasting every few days until you learn what you like. Make sure the kraut stays submerged (add water if you need to). Fermentation time varies mostly because of temperature, but I swear there is some strange alchemy that can make krauting unpredictable. The little organisms that make cabbage tangy and delicious are whimsical and fickle. Once you’re happy with the crunch and funk levels, pack your sauerkraut into ball jars and put in the fridge with enough liquid to cover the top layer of kraut.
7. **EAT.** I eat kraut with a fork, all on its own, but many people prefer to use it as a condiment or a side dish. Reubens and sausages are classic, but it’s great on salads or with charcuterie. Save the leftover juice and add to salad dressing, gravy or Bloody Marys. Enjoy those probiotics!

*Once you get the basics down, you can freestyle. Add dill, caraway, or other veggies. Cabbage is pretty cheap, so you can try things knowing that if worst comes to worst, it just goes into the compost.*



### MAPLE-BOURBON SMASH

#### INGREDIENTS

1/2 ounce pure maple syrup,  
preferably Grade A Dark Amber  
1/2 ounce fresh orange juice  
1/4 ounce fresh lemon juice  
4 dashes of Angostura bitters  
1/2 orange wheel  
2 ounces bourbon  
Ice  
1 1/2 ounces chilled seltzer

#### DIRECTIONS

In a rocks glass, combine the maple syrup with the orange juice, lemon juice, and bitters. Add the orange wheel and lightly muddle. Add the bourbon and stir well. Fill the glass with ice and top with the chilled seltzer.





# BOOK CLUB KIT

*Behind the Scenes Photos and Inspiration from* CAITE DOLAN-LEACH



A test batch of fresh homemade bread.



Photo of the wine barrel sauna that served as inspiration for *We Went to the Woods*.



The Oneida community served as an inspiration for homestead living.

Author Caite Dolan-Leach's vegetable garden where she practiced sustainable living techniques.

