

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Ariel Lawhon is a critically acclaimed, New York Times bestselling author of historical fiction. Her novels include: *The Frozen River*, *Code Name Hélène*; *I Was Anastasia*; *Flight of Dreams*; *The Wife, the Maid and the Mistress*; *When We Had Wings* (co-written with Kristina McMorris and Susan Meissner); and *Barriers to Entry* an Amazon Original Short Story. Her books have been translated into numerous languages and have been Good Morning America Book Club, Library Reads, One Book One County, Indie Next, Costco, Amazon Spotlight, and Book of the Month Club selections.

She lives in the rolling hills outside Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband and four sons. She splits her time between the grocery store and the baseball field.

[ariellawhon.com](http://ariellawhon.com).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did life in Hallowell in 1789 surprise you? Did the characters act as you expected for the historical period? What revelations were most interesting to you? How does our contemporary notion of the American dream apply to these characters?
2. Throughout the novel, Martha is frequently called to deliver babies from women of all walks of life. Have you or anyone you know delivered a child with the assistance of a midwife? Which laboring mother did you feel most connected to?
3. “Memory is a wicked thing that warps and twists. But paper and ink receive the truth without emotion, and they read it back without partiality.” (p 39) Martha’s diary is a critical component of the novel, and a key piece of evidence in Rebecca’s trial. Have you ever kept a diary? If not, did reading *The Frozen River* influence you to start?
4. “Memory is a wicked thing that warps and twists. But paper and ink receive the truth without emotion, and they read it back without partiality.” (p 39) Martha’s diary is a critical component of the novel, and a key piece of evidence in Rebecca’s trial. Have you ever kept a diary? If not, did reading *The Frozen River* influence you to start?

5. The Ballards are an incredibly closeknit family—did you have a favorite character among Martha and Ephraim’s brood? Was there a relationship between one of Martha’s children and their suitors that you were particularly cheering for?
6. Experts are few and far between in Hallowell, making Martha and Doctor’s medical knowledge all the more important, and making Doctor Page’s poor advice especially dangerous. Would you have acted differently in Martha’s place to warn the townspeople about Page?
7. Martha and her daughters spend much of the novel immersed in everyday household labor such as making candles, baking bread, weaving, and killing chickens. Were there any 1780s tasks you’d be interested to try for yourself?
8. What did you think of the way Martha and Ephraim’s past is revealed in the interstitial chapters? What did those glimpses of their earlier years reveal about them as the 1789 story unfolded? Which moments in their love story struck you most deeply?
9. Martha says the townspeople dislike her. Ephraim disagrees: “They respect you. Perhaps occasionally fear you. It’s not the same thing.” (p 56) When is it better to be honest than it is to be well liked?
10. Martha says the townspeople dislike her. Ephraim disagrees: “They respect you. Perhaps occasionally fear you. It’s not the same thing.” (p 56) When is it better to be honest than it is to be well liked?
11. Martha’s final confrontation with North has lasting consequences for both of them. Do you think justice was done? What about as regards Rebecca’s assault and Burgess’s killing? Would you have made the same choice as Martha?
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13. Did you read the author’s note? If so, did it change your evaluation of Martha’s life and the story of the “year of the long winter?”

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

Spanning the winter of 1789--90 in Hallowell, Maine, from the freezing of the Kennebec River to its late thaw, Lawhon’s outstanding sixth novel is based on the actual life of frontier midwife Martha Ballard, who recorded daily diary entries about her household and career. Called to examine the body of Joshua Burgess after it was retrieved from icy waters, Martha recognizes the telltale signs of hanging. Burgess and another man, a local judge, had been accused of raping a young pastor’s wife four months earlier, and Martha believes her account unquestioningly. She

also guesses the two crimes are connected. A sage, strong presence at 54, Martha is an extraordinary character. Devoted to her patients and her six surviving children, mostly young adults with complicated love lives, she battles subjugation by a Harvard-educated doctor who dares to think her incapable. Although this isn't a traditional detective story, Martha's narrative will capture historical mystery fans' attention with its dramatic courtroom scenes and emphasis on justice, particularly for women. Flashbacks to Martha's past add context and generate additional suspense. Martha's enduring romance with her supportive husband, Ephraim, is beautifully evoked, and details about the lives of the townspeople make the post-American Revolutionary atmosphere feel fully lived-in. Lawhon's first-rate tale should entrance readers passionate about early America and women's history.

### Publisher's Weekly

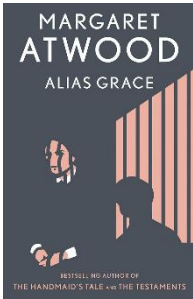
Lawhon (*Code Name Hélène*) draws from the diary of an 18th-century midwife for the stirring story of one woman's quest for justice. In 1789 Maine, 54-year-old midwife Martha Ballard is asked to help determine the cause of death for Joshua Burgess, an accused rapist whose body was found frozen in the river. Martha is convinced that Burgess was beaten and hanged before he was thrown into the water. Several months earlier, she treated a woman named Rebecca Foster for injuries sustained from rape, and Rebecca told her the assailants were Burgess and Joseph North, a judge. After a court determines there's not enough evidence against North for a rape charge, despite Martha's testimony about Rebecca's injuries, a trial is arranged on different charges, but North disappears. Martha attempts to prove Burgess was murdered, hoping to bring scrutiny to North as a suspect in the killing, whose motive may have been to keep Burgess from testifying against him about the rape. Lawhon combines modern prose with the immediacy of her source material, making for an accessible and textured narrative. This accomplished historical powerfully speaks to centuries-old inequities that remain in the present day.

### Kirkus Reviews

When a man accused of rape turns up dead, an Early American town seeks justice amid rumors and controversy. Lawhon's fifth work of historical fiction is inspired by the true story and diaries of midwife Martha Ballard of Hallowell, Maine, a character she brings to life brilliantly here. As Martha tells her patient in an opening chapter set in 1789, "You need not fear....In all my years attending women in childbirth, I have never lost a mother." This track record grows in numerous compelling scenes of labor and delivery, particularly one in which Martha has to clean up after the mistakes of a pompous doctor educated at Harvard, one of her nemeses in a town that roils with gossip and disrespect for women's abilities. Supposedly, the only time a midwife can testify in court is regarding paternity when a woman gives birth out of wedlock--but Martha also takes the witness stand in the rape case against a dead man named Joshua Burgess and his living friend Col. Joseph North, whose role as judge in local court proceedings has made the victim, Rebecca Foster, reluctant to make her complaint public. Further complications are numerous: North has control over the Ballard family's lease on their property; Rebecca is carrying the child of one of her rapists; Martha's son was seen fighting with Joshua Burgess on the day of his death. Lawhon weaves all this into a richly satisfying drama that moves suspensefully between childbed, courtroom, and the banks of the Kennebec River. The undimmed romance between 40-something Martha and her husband, Ephraim, adds a racy flair to the proceedings. Knowing how rare the quality of their relationship is sharpens the intensity of Martha's gaze as she watches the romantic lives of her grown children unfold. As she did with Nancy Wake in *Code Name Hélène* (2020), Lawhon creates a stirring portrait of a real-life heroine and, as in all her books, includes an endnote with detailed background. A vivid, exciting page-turner from one of our most interesting authors of historical fiction.

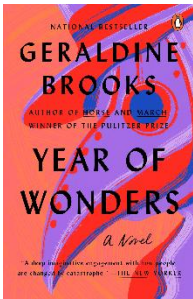
## READALIKES

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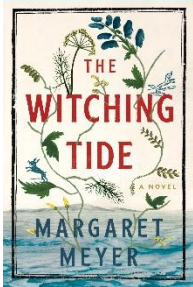
### ***Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood**

Based on the true story of Grace Marks, a young Irish immigrant and servant convicted of the brutal murders of her employer and his housekeeper in 1843 Canada. Grace's fragmented memories and mysterious past complicate the search for justice, as Dr. Simon Jordan, a psychiatrist, attempts to uncover the truth behind her role in the crime



### ***Years of Wonder* by Geraldine Brooks**

Eighteen-year-old Anna Frith tells the story of her remote English village, Eyam, which was infected by the plague in 1666 and where, persuaded by their vicar, the townspeople decided to quarantine themselves. The village must now survive the plague, while dealing with the horrors of loss and their own fear and superstition.



### ***The Witching Tide* by Margaret Meyer**

Inspired by historical events--a deadly witch hunt in 17th-century England that claimed many innocent lives. Alys, a young woman accused of witchcraft, faces the terrifying possibility of execution while uncovering dark secrets about her own past. As tension mounts, Alys must navigate a world of betrayal, survival, and hidden truths.

## OTHER MATERIALS

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Only include materials in this section if they are essential to understanding the book as a whole, or offer an important, additional perspective.