

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in Virginia and raised in Alabama, Rachel Hawkins has been writing since Kindergarten when her first book, a tense thriller involving a unicorn, a witch, and a princess, was called, “very imaginative!” by her teacher and “a searing work of genius” by her mother.



Since then, Rachel has written over a dozen books for children and adults (sadly all unicorn-free thus far), and been published in more than twenty countries. As Rachel Hawkins, she wrote the *New York Times* bestselling *THE WIFE UPSTAIRS*, a Southern Gothic twist on *JANE EYRE* that the *Southern Review of Books* called, “a thrill ride,” and *Entertainment Weekly* dubbed, “a gothic thriller laced with arsenic.” Her latest thriller, *RECKLESS GIRLS*, also debuted on the *New York Times* list with Kirkus calling it, “a soapy, claustrophobic page-turner.”

When not writing modern Gothic thrillers as Rachel Hawkins, she also pens paranormal romantic comedies under the name Erin Sterling. Her debut romance, *THE EX HEX*, was a Book of the Month pick as well as a *New York*

Times and *USA Today* Bestseller.

Rachel currently lives in Auburn, Alabama with her husband, son, and five cats. (Yes, five. She knows.). In her free time, she enjoys reading, cooking, and picking up an assortment of creative hobbies she will give up on after a week or two. You can find her on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

Author’s website.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This novel alternates between timelines and perspectives, and includes articles, podcast transcripts, song lyrics and book excerpts. How did the structure of the novel affect your reading experience and/or help to build suspense?
2. Discuss the evolution of Mari and Lara’s relationship, alongside that of Emily and Chess. What role did men play in their sense of competition with each other? How did their dynamic shift after the men were out of their

lives?

3. How did Pierce's death affect each of the characters in the 1970s storyline?
4. How did Matt's desire for control over Emily manifest? Compare and contrast the ways in which the topic of having children or the loss of a child affected Emily and Matt, as well as Mari, Lara and Pierce.
5. "It was hard for two people to be artists when the rugs needed Hoovering, and food needed to be purchased, dishes washed. And somehow, those things kept falling on her." (page 27) How did Mari's romantic life interfere with her writing? In the dynamic of Pierce and Mari's relationship, why was his music always prioritized over her writing? Additionally, how do Pierce and Noel react when Lara tells them she's written some songs she'd like to share? (page 68)
6. Though Mari and Lara were initially expected to be nothing more than Noel's and Pierce's muses and companions, they were the ones to create groundbreaking art that summer. In defying expectations, what did they prove, who did they prove it to, and should they have had to prove anything at all? Do women today still have to "prove" themselves in certain spaces?
7. Discuss why Mari rewrote the ending of her and Pierce's story. How does Mari's altered narrative influence Emily's life?
8. When Mari considers how her letters might be read after she has died, she acknowledges that "[s]he's done what she can, reclaimed the narrative for herself in a way that makes sense to her, and if it means the world one day believes she murdered Pierce, at least it ensures no one will ever separate them again." (page 276) What does this say about the legacies we leave behind and our inability to control whether our art is interpreted as we intended? What do you think the novel suggests about fate and letting things happen as the universe means for them to?
9. The first line of *Lilith Rising* reads: "Houses remember." In the *People* magazine clip on page 254, a local resident says of Villa Aestas, "The house is just cursed." Do you think there's truth to either statement? Can places hold memories?
10. Hawkins drew inspiration from the summer of 1816, when Percy and Mary Shelley stayed at a villa on Lake Geneva with Lord Byron. What parallels do you see between the 1970s storyline and this moment in literary history?

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

Embroiled in a bitter divorce and struggling with writer's block, cozy author Emma Sheridan gratefully accepts an invitation from her best friend, self-help guru Chess Chandler, to spend the summer in an Italian villa. Despite Villa Aestas' sun-drenched beauty, Emma is drawn to the house's sordid history: up-and-coming musician Pierce Sheldon was murdered there in 1975. Even more fascinating, famous author Mari Godwick penned her genre-defining horror novel, *Lilith Rising*, at the villa during the same summer when Pierce, Mari's boyfriend, died. Cozies lose their appeal for Emma, and she turns to true crime, determined to write the story of the villa's bloody past. In an alternating narrative, Mari provides insight into the tensions that bred Pierce's murder, especially those surrounding her sister, Lara, unwanted in the villa and struggling for recognition for her own musical talent and her desire for their rock-star host, Gordon. As Mari's story darkens, old resentments between Emma and Chess resurface, and Emma's suspicion that Chess is closer to her vengeful ex-husband than she's revealed casts a dangerous shadow on their retreat. Feminist themes, ruthlessness, and alluring settings forge links to Hawkins' last thriller, *Reckless Girls* (2022), but this story's finely honed interplay of creative ambition and haunting sadness makes it a step above. Here, Hawkins pokes at the darker aspects of both true crime and self-help, and it works beautifully. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Hawkins' star is definitely on the rise after two bestsellers, and this one will propel her further into the stratosphere.

Publisher's Weekly

Friendship and professional jealousy fuel this nail-biter from bestseller Hawkins (*The Wife Upstairs*). As children, Chess Chandler and Emily Sheridan were inseparable, but they grew apart as adults. Chess became a popular self-help guru with books, videos, and TED talks, while Emily found moderate success writing an amateur sleuth mystery series. Chess's star and wealth continue to rise as Emily deals with a divorce conflict over her royalties, health problems, and writer's block. Then Chess suggests a "hard reset" to their friendship with a six-week stay at Villa Aestas outside Orvieto, Italy. Emily is reluctant until she learns the villa was rented in the summer of 1974 by rock star Noel Gordon. The villa became known as the Murder House after a guest of Noel's, an unknown musician, was murdered there that summer. The villa--and its past, chronicled in a hidden diary--energizes Emily, who begins to write again, starting with the provocative first sentence: "Houses remember." But Chess is stymied, unable to work until she finds Emily's rough draft. Intense characters complement the brisk plot, which shifts smoothly between the present and 1974. Hawkins consistently entertains. Agent: Holly Root, Root Literary. (Jan.)

Library Journal

In 1974, aspiring writer Mari Godwick penned her famous feminist horror novel, *Lilith Rising*, during a summer spent at the Villa Rosato in Italy--the same villa where her boyfriend, up-and-coming musician Pierce Sheldon, was bludgeoned to death. Now, nearly 50 years later, cozy mystery writer Emily McCrae and her wildly successful friend, self-help guru Chess Chandler, are spending six weeks in the villa. Unfortunately, the beautiful setting isn't enough to blunt the feelings of jealousy and annoyance Emily harbors for Chess. A copy of *Lilith Rising*, found on a bookshelf in the house provides the escapism she needs, and before long, Emily is seeing clues around the villa and wondering what really happened that summer. Told in dual time lines, Mari's story reads a bit like an episode of VH1's *Behind the Music*, while Emily's is more women's fiction with a focus on her dysfunctional relationships. VERDICT The story is a slow burn with a flame that never quite materializes. Give this one to readers looking for psychological suspense and twist endings, but those seeking high-stakes tension will want to look elsewhere.--Vicki Briner

Kirkus Reviews

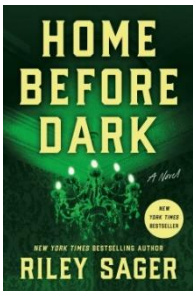
Past and present collide when two old friends spend a summer writing at an infamous villa in Italy. After a tough year, Emily Sheridan needs a change. Enter Chess Chandler, her best friend since childhood, the golden girl who has become effortlessly famous for her self-help books and her glamorous Instagram posts and who has rented an Italian villa for the summer--a villa famous not only as a luxury retreat, but as the scene of a 1970s murder. Hawkins then turns the narrative over to the people who inhabited the villa that tragic summer--particularly a young woman writer who finds the inspiration to write a seminal work of horror her hapless, brilliant husband and the cruel, famous young aristocrat who drew them all there. It takes barely a page for the allusions to become apparent: This is a reimagining of the famous summer of 1814, when Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron held a ghost story contest from which Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was born. The novel continues to cut from the summer of 1974 to the present, as Emily begins to recapture her own power and imagination as a writer--even as she discovers that Chess may not be the friend she appears to be. Though the introduction of the major players of 1974 (Mari Godwick, Pierce Sheldon, Noel Gordon, etc.) feels rather heavy-handed, the characters quickly take on a fascinating life and energy that elevates them from being mere copies of the historic Romantics. And while the operationally tragic characters of the 1970s are ultimately more intriguing than Chess and Emily and their (mostly) petty dramas, Hawkins casts a sharp eye throughout to the way we construct stories about female artists--and the moral ambiguity inherent in creation and fame. The effect lingers like a shadow, or a creature, that endures past the final words. Hawkins manages to achieve the seemingly impossible: A *Frankenstein*-inspired novel that feels both fresh and unique. Copyright (c) Kirkus Reviews, used with permission.

SOLITO READALIKES - FOOTNOTES



***Shadow Sister* by Lindsay Marcott**

Returning to her haunted childhood home to finally find the truth surrounding her mother's death, Ava, while dealing with her vindictive father, her secretive new sister-in-law and romance with her first crush, makes a terrifying discovery on the property and must decide just how far into the past she's willing to go.



***Home Before Dark* by Riley Sager**

Twenty-five years after her father published a wildly popular non-fiction book based on her family's rushed exit from a haunted Victorian estate, naysayer Maggie inherits the house and begins renovations only to make a number of disturbing discoveries.



***The Paper Palace* by Miranda Cowley Heller**

While staying at “The Paper Palace” — the family summer place she has visited every summer of her life, 50-year-old Elle must decide between the life she has built with her husband and the life she always imagined she would have had with her childhood love.