



BOOK CLUB KIT

"This beautiful book is shot through with such tenderness and humanity, such love and courage and beauty and hope, that it feels almost like a prayer."

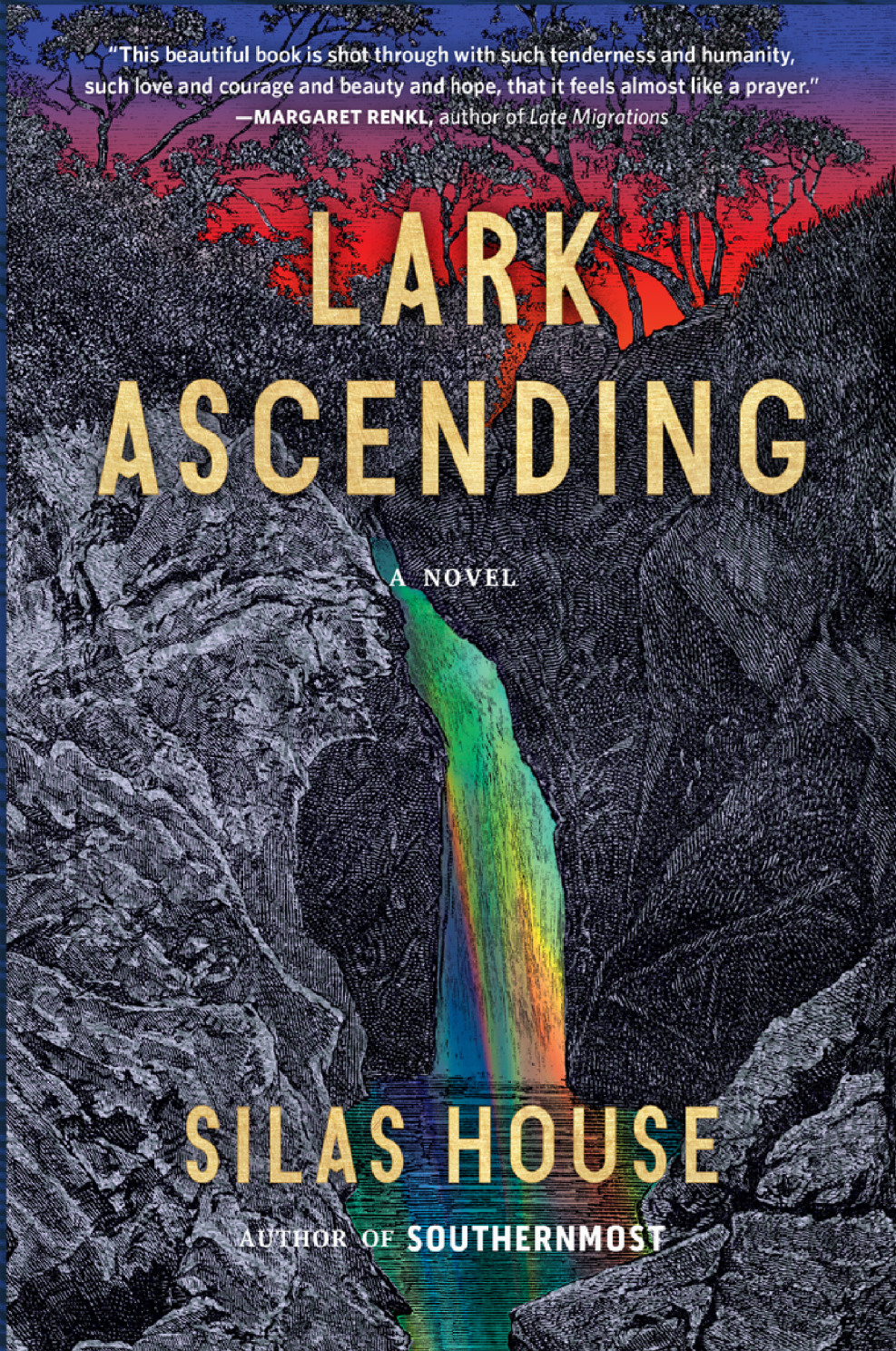
—MARGARET RENKL, author of *Late Migrations*

LARK ASCENDING

A NOVEL

SILAS HOUSE

AUTHOR OF *SOUTHERNMOST*



GRIEF AND HOPE: WHY I WROTE *LARK ASCENDING*

An Essay by **SILAS HOUSE**

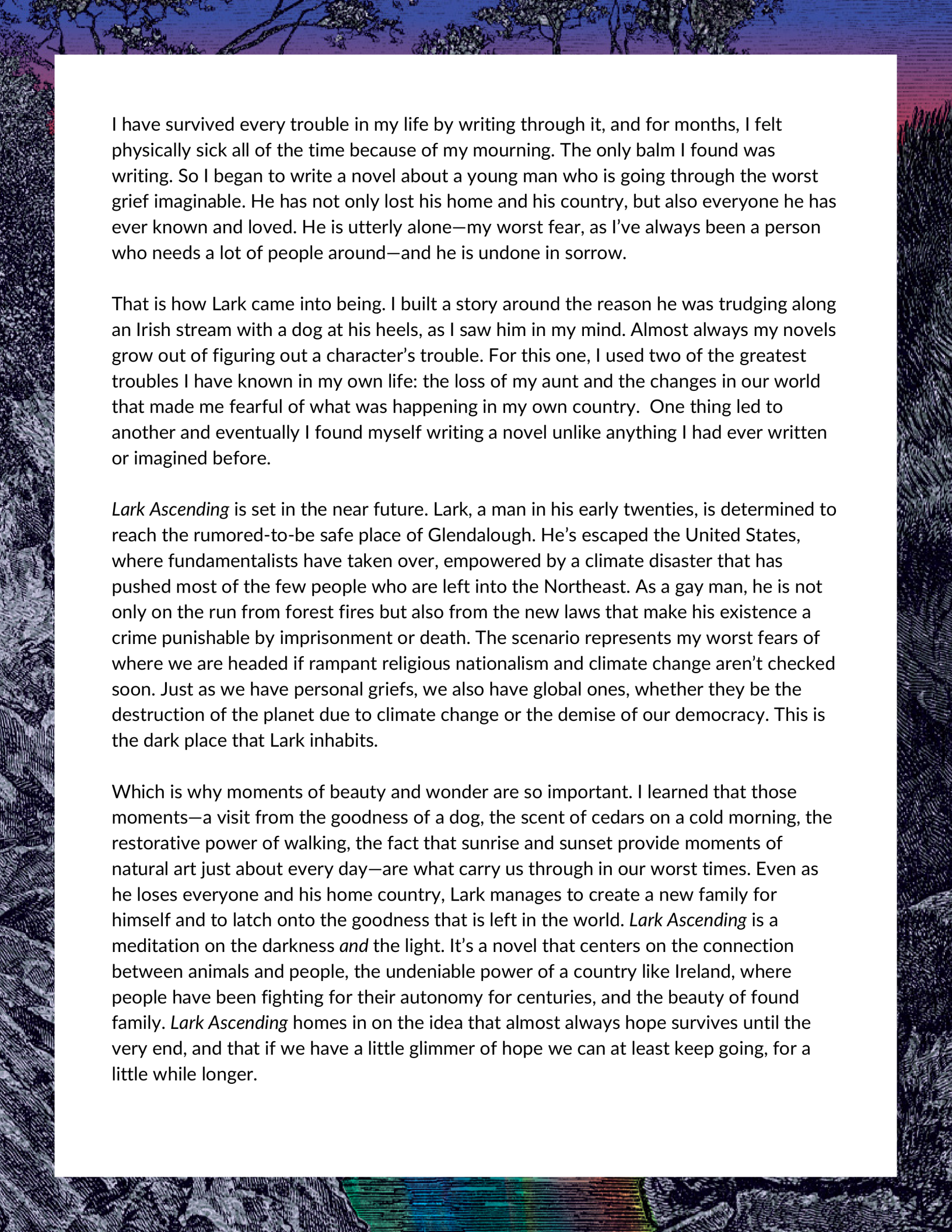
*Grief never goes away. It might change shape,
but it always has its teeth in you.*
—Allison Moorer

By the time I set out to write *Lark Ascending*, I had long been worrying about the changes happening in our nation and across the world, particularly how they would shape our future. But I was also thinking a lot about hope and its importance to carrying us through trouble. I was thinking a lot about the way little moments of wonder are more cherished in hard times, how the light is sweeter when you have been mired in darkness. In the winter of 2015 I learned that nothing, however, changes us more than grief.

I had lost my aunt, Sis, who had been a second mother to me. Sis was foundational in so many ways—she fostered a love for cinema in me, she bought me my first typewriter, guitar, and books—and when she died, I was shattered. I had never lost anyone so close to me and at one point I found myself on the floor, howling with pain. But life would not allow me to do that.

I had long been committed to do a visiting writer gig at the University of Ireland at Galway and her sudden death didn't allow time to reschedule it. The day after her funeral I boarded a flight bound for Ireland, moving through the airports like a ghost being steered by my husband, who was thankfully able to go with me. I can barely remember the lectures I delivered, the dinners with faculty and students. Each day I woke up and realized, again and again, that Sis was truly gone, that although she had visited me in dreams she had certainly died. I do remember moments of great beauty and wonder during my time in Ireland, though. The kindness of the people. The melancholy gray of the skies over Galway Bay. The incredible cleanness of the air as I rode a bicycle on Inishmore, a small island off the Western coast of the Republic. I remember a sheepdog who followed me on a grassy trail where I was walking and grieving. I bent to pet him, and he licked my fingers while he looked into my eyes.

Around the same time, I felt I had become part of a collective grief of people who felt as if we were losing our country. A new kind of politics had emerged and reshaped our world, fueling division, cruelty, and even reshaping the way many people defined truth. At every gathering I went to inevitably the conversation would turn to the volatile political landscape and someone would often ask "So, if it gets worse, where are we going to go?" My answer was always Ireland.



I have survived every trouble in my life by writing through it, and for months, I felt physically sick all of the time because of my mourning. The only balm I found was writing. So I began to write a novel about a young man who is going through the worst grief imaginable. He has not only lost his home and his country, but also everyone he has ever known and loved. He is utterly alone—my worst fear, as I’ve always been a person who needs a lot of people around—and he is undone in sorrow.

That is how Lark came into being. I built a story around the reason he was trudging along an Irish stream with a dog at his heels, as I saw him in my mind. Almost always my novels grow out of figuring out a character’s trouble. For this one, I used two of the greatest troubles I have known in my own life: the loss of my aunt and the changes in our world that made me fearful of what was happening in my own country. One thing led to another and eventually I found myself writing a novel unlike anything I had ever written or imagined before.

Lark Ascending is set in the near future. Lark, a man in his early twenties, is determined to reach the rumored-to-be safe place of Glendalough. He’s escaped the United States, where fundamentalists have taken over, empowered by a climate disaster that has pushed most of the few people who are left into the Northeast. As a gay man, he is not only on the run from forest fires but also from the new laws that make his existence a crime punishable by imprisonment or death. The scenario represents my worst fears of where we are headed if rampant religious nationalism and climate change aren’t checked soon. Just as we have personal griefs, we also have global ones, whether they be the destruction of the planet due to climate change or the demise of our democracy. This is the dark place that Lark inhabits.

Which is why moments of beauty and wonder are so important. I learned that those moments—a visit from the goodness of a dog, the scent of cedars on a cold morning, the restorative power of walking, the fact that sunrise and sunset provide moments of natural art just about every day—are what carry us through in our worst times. Even as he loses everyone and his home country, Lark manages to create a new family for himself and to latch onto the goodness that is left in the world. *Lark Ascending* is a meditation on the darkness *and* the light. It’s a novel that centers on the connection between animals and people, the undeniable power of a country like Ireland, where people have been fighting for their autonomy for centuries, and the beauty of found family. *Lark Ascending* homes in on the idea that almost always hope survives until the very end, and that if we have a little glimmer of hope we can at least keep going, for a little while longer.

Questions for Discussion

LARK ASCENDING

by Silas House

1. Lark is dealing with extreme grief throughout most of the book, which House says is his own meditation on the way he believes most of us have been grieving through the last few years, whether because of the pandemic, national division, witnessing the climate crisis, or personal reasons. Did reading the book make you think about your own experiences with grief?

2. *Lark Ascending* asks the question of what will happen if climate displacement happens to Americans in the near future. Did reading the novel make you think about the climate crisis and, in particular, climate refugees, in a new way?

3. Some of the chapters are told from the point of view of the beagle, Seamus. How did you feel about these sections of the book? Were they effective? Did they bring a new element of hope or wonder to the grim scenario at hand? Does Lark's relationship with Seamus remind you of your connections to animals?

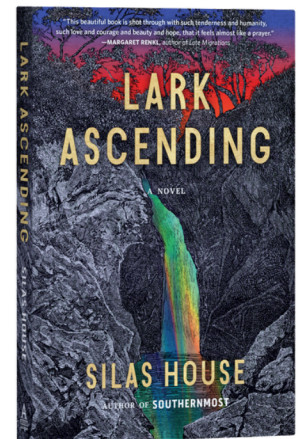
4. While the book is epic in scope, taking place in Appalachia, Maine, Nova Scotia, as well as on a journey across the North Atlantic, the longest section of the book takes place in Ireland and is an homage to the country whose people have long fought against larger forces for their own culture to survive. Did you think the use of Ireland in this scenario was an effective one?

5. One of the consistent themes in all of Silas House's work is that of created family, and this novel is perhaps his closest look at this concept and the way so many people who are not blood-related create unbreakable bonds. Talk about the family that is created between Lark, Seamus, and Helen.

6. House has said he wanted to create a tender love story between two men set against the backdrop of a fundamentalist government that has outlawed LGBTQ relationships because he knows it has happened in the past and he believes it will happen again in the future. What were your feelings about the love between Arlo and Lark? Was this your first time to read a book from the POV of a gay narrator?

7. Did you have a favorite section of the book that should be the focus of particular conversation?

8. Throughout the book, characters are constantly in motion and are traveling so much that Lark and Helen find it hard to settle down at the end. Did you feel the rhythm of the book was informed by the constant motion? Did this rhythm contribute to the page-turning aspect of the novel?





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9. Although the book focuses on three main characters, there are many memorable secondary characters throughout such as Arlo's sister, Sera, the quiet girl, Charlotte, the mysterious and wild Ronan, the calm and decisive Johanna, and many others. What secondary character has stuck with you the most? Who is your favorite main character of the book?

10. The book is named after a famous piece of classical music which is referenced briefly in the book. Did you already know this one movement piece of music? If so, what are your feelings about the song? House has said that the music is a journey that contains joy, sorrow, and everything in between and he wanted the novel to reflect that. Did it accomplish that for you?

11. Throughout the book Lark has been aiming for the sanctuary of Glendalough. But when he gets there he is told his dog cannot stay. How did you feel about Lark's response to this? Did you feel the compromise that is found between Lark, Helen, and Seamus—who cannot let go of their wildness—and the group at Glendalough was a satisfactory one?

12. House has said that the tragic character Rowan is actually "a double of Lark, but the difference is that Lark had good people to nurture him while Rowan had a terrible man teaching her the ways of the world, so the way they are similar—being wild survivors alone in the world—yet so different—Rowan has lost her humanity while Lark has held onto his—is commentary on the how much of who we are is owed to our opportunities in life. Without the guidance of his good parents," House says, "Lark could have easily turned out like Rowan. So she is a villain in the book but I also find her character to be a very sad one, and I feel sorry for her." How do you feel about this?

13. How did you feel about the framing device of Lark in his old age telling the story? Was it effective for you? Why or why not?