

The Lightkeepers: A Novel

By Abby Geni

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The Lightkeepers: A Novel By Abby Geni

Winner of the 2016 B&N Discover Great New Writers Award for Fiction

In *The Lightkeepers*, we follow Miranda, a nature photographer who travels to the Farallon Islands, an exotic and dangerous archipelago off the coast of California, for a one-year residency capturing the landscape. Her only companions are the scientists studying there, odd and quirky refugees from the mainland living in rustic conditions; they document the fish populations around the island, the bold trio of sharks called the Sisters that hunt the surrounding waters, and the overwhelming bird population who, at times, create the need to wear hard hats as protection from their attacks.

Shortly after her arrival, Miranda is assaulted by one of the inhabitants of the islands. A few days later, her assailant is found dead, perhaps the result of an accident. As the novel unfolds, Miranda gives witness to the natural wonders of this special place as she grapples with what has happened to her and deepens her connection (and her suspicions) to her companions, while falling under the thrall of the legends of the place nicknamed “the Islands of the Dead.” And when more violence occurs, each member of this strange community falls under suspicion.

The Lightkeepers upends the traditional structure of a mystery novel —an isolated environment, a limited group of characters who might not be trustworthy, a death that may or may not have been accidental, a balance of discovery and action —while also exploring wider themes of the natural world, the power of loss, and the nature of recovery. It is a luminous debut novel from a talented and provocative new writer.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Lightkeepers*

"Readers [...] will find themselves carried along by a sturdy, rather old-fashioned thriller ramped up by some modern, ecologically themed plot twists... The plot is structured like that of a horror film, moving from one alarming event to another, and in between, maintaining a tension around the question of how much worse the situation will get... [a] peculiar, atmospheric novel... It's become customary—the fallback consolation of the book reviewer—to say that one is eager to see what a writer will do next. But in fact that is the case here. Ultimately, what engages us in *The Lightkeepers*, beyond its energetic plot, is the sense of watching its author discover her ability to construct a suspenseful narrative. And we finish this novel curious to find out what sorts of stories Abby Geni will choose to tell."—*New York Times Book Review*

"With The *Lightkeepers*, Geni joins the ranks of Barbara Kingsolver and Annie Proulx—novelists for whom nature is a driving narrative force instead of a backdrop. However, Geni's debut is a few shades darker than *Prodigal Summer* or *Close Range*, and instead of Kingsolver and Proulx's architectural prose, Geni writes in small, perfect sentences stripped of ornamentation, often single clauses. It's a beautiful effect; pages pass quickly and effortlessly. By the novel's end, you'll crave another journey with Geni to some other wild, forgotten corner of the globe."—*Chicago Review of Books*

"Abby Geni's sense of place will remind readers of Eowyn Ivey's Alaska in *The Snow Child* Geni's prose of last year's Discover Award winner (fiction) *All the Birds, Singing* by Evie Wyld." – Barnes & Noble Discover New Writers Announcement

"[A] dazzlingly unsettling first novel …The language is as startlingly rich as the terrain, making you look at everything as if you had never seen it before… Geni expertly propels her story into a breathtakingly shocking climax. The nature she describes has no sense of right or wrong. And what's more frightening, neither do her characters, and in this stunning debut, both pull you in and hold you like a riptide."—Caroline Leavitt, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Part murder mystery, part psychological thriller, part ode to one of the western world's wildest landscapes, this dark, compelling tale is an astonishingly ambitious debut…Like many literary classics and novels that are destined to be classics, *The Lightkeepers* raises questions about humanity that are anything but light. Unlike many classics, it's an accessible page-turner whose surprises, both fictional and stylistic, unfold so satisfyingly that the novel is also a pleasure to read." —Meredith Maran, *Chicago Tribune*

"The strange and desolate Farallon Islands serve as the backdrop for this evocative and enchanting debut novel… Geni writes with the clear, calm confidence of a master storyteller. This is a haunting and immersive adventure, set in an unforgettable, wild habitat of its own." —*Publishers Weekly* Starred and Boxed Review

"The six biologists of the Farallon Islands, like the animals they observe, survive on instinct. Even as they analyze and obsess, they act upon each other with ferocity, with tenderness, with primal need. We are as captivated by, as trapped by, these islands as the characters — and no one in this hypnotic story, including the reader, stands on solid ground. *The Lightkeepers* is a stunner: intense, surefooted, masterful. This is a book to swallow whole." —Rebecca Makkai, author of *The Hundred-Year House*

“Miranda's travelogue, at once emotional and dreamy and rendered in crisp, stunning prose, is so central to the book that readers may at times forget the underpinnings of the locked-room mystery or brush off the question of her reliability as a narrator…Geni may be unmatched in her ability to describe nature in ways that feel both photographically accurate and emotionally resonant. Natural wildness, human unpredictability, and the subtle use of literary devices are woven here into a remarkable, vertiginous web.” —*Kirkus* (Starred Review)

"What a strange, wonderful novel this is. At once a soaring paean to the natural world and a story filled with mystery and intrigue as deep and dark as the sea. *The Lightkeepers* is mesmerizing."—Cristina Henriquez, author of *The Book of Unknown Americans*

“Part ghost story, part murder mystery, part meditation on the cruel impartiality of nature, *The Lightkeepers* holds the reader enthralled in the grasp of an achingly vulnerable, creepingly unreliable narrator. Evocative of Lily King's *Euphoria*, this riveting debut novel is both an exotic escape from the familiar world and an unflinching exploration of the universality of human nature." —Gina Frangello, author of *A Life in Men*

“Geni's haunting debut takes place on an island just 30 miles from San Francisco, but it might as well be another planet — killer sharks circle the water, violent birds rip the skin off of seals and peck humans in the head, and the waters are so rough, there isn't even a dock for boats. Miranda, a nature photographer, applies for short-term residence on the island, living in a cabin with a few quirky biologists. But things change when she suffers a violent attack — and then her attacker is mysteriously killed the next day. Geni's writing about the natural world is marvelous and her atmospheric novel is not to be missed.” —*Entertainment Weekly*, 11 Books You have to Read in January.

“A novel filled with wide-open spaces and also a creeping claustrophobia. The setting takes on the role of a character, and the Farallons are masterfully brought to life on the page through Geni’s luminous prose. There is a soothing, hypnotic quality to Geni’s writing—and an unexpected tenderness, too, one that belies the thick sense of malice and increasing sense of dread that swirls about Miranda’s island home…Riveting from beginning to end, *The Lightkeepers* is unsettling in all the best ways.” —*Bookpage*

“Remarkable” —*Bustle*

“Mysterious, vivid, and original, The Lightkeepers will quickly ensnare readers in its cruelly beautiful world.” —Buzzfeed

“The success of every Hitchcock film ever was built on three things: suspense, surprise, and shock. The same could be said of *The Lightkeepers*, Abby Geni’s unnervingly fun new novel…Murder mystery meets psychological thriller meets Darwinian ode in this compelling debut. Geni is a master of elegant plot twists, and her poignant payoff will leave you satisfied but also wanting a bit more time on the island.” —*PureWow*

“With her debut novel *The Lightkeepers*, a beautifully written literary thriller, Abby Geni cleverly ushers the Farallons into the literary fold…The corporeal, technicolor sentences in The Lightkeepers allow us to visit, to inhabit a wild gem of the Bay Area, without actually interfering — as humans are prone to do — with the island’s brutal grace.” —KQED Arts

“..violence in the small community seems to be everywhere, and everyone and everything seems culpable.” —*Marie Claire*

“Spending a year documenting the harsh beauty of California’s Farrallon Islands is a dream come true for

photographer Miranda—until her idyll turns deadly.” —*People Magazine*, Great New Fiction

“In *The Lightkeepers*, Abby Geni transports us to a world that is startling, strange, and wondrously dark. It is beautifully rendered and as suspenseful as the most chilling ghost story. This is a writer who knows exactly what to tell us and what to hold back; I was blown away by her imagination and her talent.” —Kim Brooks, author of *The Houseguest*

Praise for *The Last Animal*:

“I have known for a while that Abby Geni is a brilliant writer, and I’m happy that at last the world will find out. These are sharp, incisive, thoughtful, and utterly original stories, and I recommend this book with all my heart!” —Dan Chaon, National Book Award Finalist, *Stay Awake* and *Await Your Reply*

“Abby Geni is a sharpshooter, a tamer of wild animals, a clear-eyed wonder. *The Last Animal* is a phenomenally ambitious debut collection and announces Geni’s many talents to the world with the volume of a herd of stampeding elephants. I loved this book, and you will, too.” —Emma Straub, *The Vacationers*

“Abby Geni’s worlds exist at the boundary between desolation and abundance, civilization and nature, love and loneliness. It is as if everything and everyone in these beautiful stories is at least half wild.” —Ramona Ausubel, *A Guide to Being Born*

“*The Last Animal* is a work of rare insight and beauty. Abby Geni's vision is expansive and haunting and wholly new, and she illuminates her characters' loneliness and longing in a way that will break your heart. This book is about love and animals and loss and the whole world; you must read it.” —Karen E. Bender, National Book Award Finalist, *Refund*

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About the Author

Abby Geni is a graduate of Oberlin University and the Iowa Writers Workshop as well as the recipient of an Iowa Fellowship. Her work won first place in the *Glimmer Train* Fiction Open and was listed in *The Best American Stories 2010*. She lives in Chicago.

Users Review

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Jennifer Newhouse:

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