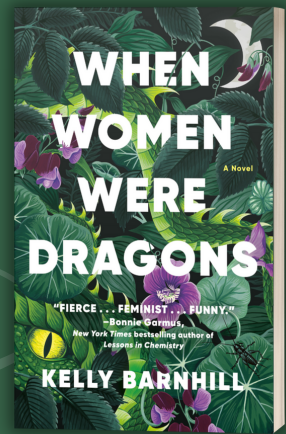


# WHEN WOMEN WERE DRAGONS

## Book Club Kit Includes:

- Discussion Guide
- Reading List
- Macrame Craft
- Author Q&A

"Fierce . . . feminist . . . funny."  
—Bonnie Garmus, *LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY*



### INTRODUCTION

A rollicking feminist tale set in 1950s America, where thousands of women have spontaneously transformed into dragons, exploding notions of a woman's place in the world and expanding minds about accepting others for who they really are.

Alex Green is a young girl in a world much like ours, except for its most seminal event: the Mass Dragoning of 1955, when hundreds of thousands of ordinary wives and mothers sprouted wings, scales, and talons; left a trail of fiery destruction in their path; and took to the skies. Was it their choice? What will become of those left behind? Why did Alex's beloved aunt Marla transform but her mother did not? Alex doesn't know. It's taboo to speak of.

Forced into silence, Alex nevertheless must face the consequences of this astonishing event: a mother more protective than ever; an absentee father; the upsetting insistence that her aunt never even existed; and watching her beloved cousin Bea become dangerously obsessed with the forbidden.

In this timely and timeless speculative novel, award-winning author Kelly Barnhill boldly explores rage, memory, and the tyranny of forced limitations. When Women Were Dragons exposes a world that wants to keep women small—their lives and their prospects—and examines what happens when they rise en masse and take up the space they deserve.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Now that you have read the entire novel, go back to page 3 and reread the letter written by Marya Tilman. How does it make you feel? Inspired? Angry? Why did Barnhill choose to introduce When Women Were Dragons with this passage?
2. The main character, Alex, had many different roles in the book. She was a daughter, a cousin, a student, and a mother. Which one do you think was most important? How do each of these affect her character development?
3. Consider the antiquated stigma of women in education: How does the study of mathematics and science intertwine in the story? Why is the pursuit of education crucial for Alex, Alex's mom, and Marla?



## QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

4. After the Mass Dragoning of 1955, a wave of silence and denial followed. The topic of dragons and the women who left became unmentionable. Name other historical events that compel us to remember and honor the past rather than forget.
5. What is the connection between dragoning and femininity? Discuss topics such as the taboo of the female body and the history of sexism.
6. Throughout the book, Alex struggles with her abandonment, responsibilities, and loneliness. When does she finally find community and family? Even then, why was it difficult for Alex to accept Beatrice's dragoning?
7. Sonja Blomgren is Alex Green's first love. Although separated in their childhood, they are reunited at the University of Wisconsin. Why is Alex's relationship with Sonja meaningful to her coming-of-age? How did Sonja's dragoning affect Alex?
8. The Greek myth of Tithonus is revisited a few times throughout the story. Why is it significant? Discuss the metaphor of memory, love, and selfishness within the poem.
9. Barnhill chooses to separate the book between Alex's point of view and Dr. Gantz's research. In what ways are they similar? Different? What effect do you think this structural choice had on the story?
10. Alex experiences two moments of extreme anger: in the school's office with Beatrice and in the library with Mrs. Gyzinska. How are these two moments connected? Why do you think Alex reacted the way she did?
11. When Women Were Dragons is a feminist story showcasing the fortitude and resilience of women. Examine moments where the patriarchy is emphasized and why it is relevant to instances of dragoning.
12. In chapter 9, Alex describes the nationwide trauma and grief experienced post-Mass Dragoning: ". . . it brought the nation, for a moment, to its knees, reeling in a state of loss and confusion and sorrow. There were few people in the entire country who did not know at least one affected family." How does this relate to our current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic?
13. The novel ends with Alex moving back into her old neighborhood, on the same plot of land where she had her first experience with a dragon. She chooses to fill and decorate her house with mementos of her life experiences with different people. Why is that impactful? How does it compare to her childhood home? Ultimately, why do you believe Alex chose not to dragon?

## OTHER RECOMMENDED READS

- Alice Hoffman, *SECOND NATURE*
- Sarah Blake, *NAAMAH*
- Lyndsay Faye, *THE KING OF INFINITE*
- Jennifer duBois, *THE SPECTATORS*
- Emma Straub, *THIS TIME TOMORROW*
- Menna van Praag, *THE HOUSE AT THE END OF HOPE STREET*



# CREATE A MACRAME LEAF KEYCHAIN

In When Women Were Dragons, Alex's mom is fascinated with knot-making and mathematics behind the knots. Double Rainbow Design created a custom keychain inspired by the book! Follow along with her tutorial below to make your own.

*"She even had special knots that she sometimes put in my pockets.  
A knot for safety. A knot for luck. A knot for knowledge."*

—WHEN WOMEN WERE DRAGONS



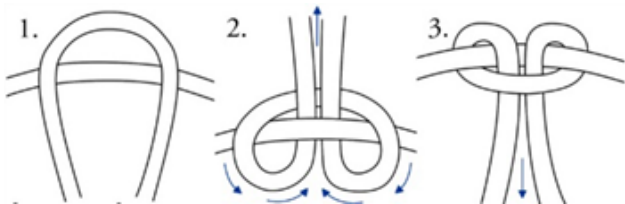
## MATERIALS NEEDED

- 32 inches of light green 4mm single twist cotton cord
- 48 inches of dark green 4mm single twist cotton cord
- Keyring
- Sharp scissors
- Fabric stiffening spray
- Fine tooth comb
- Measuring tape or ruler
- Tape
- (Optional) Purple beads and thread

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Step 1: Measure and cut your cord**  
Measure and cut one 8 inch length of light green cord, four 6 inch lengths of light green cord, and eight 6 inch lengths of dark green cord.

**Step 2: Build your leaf**  
Tape the keyring to your table to keep it stable for easier knotting. Fold the 8 inch light green cord in half and attach it to the keyring with a lark's head knot.







Fold one of the dark green 6 inch cords in half. With the loop on the left side, place this cord under your center cord.



Fold a second dark green 6 inch cord in half. With the loop on the right, place the loose ends through the loop of the first cord.



Then take the loose ends from the first cord and pull them over top and through the second loop.



Pull each end tightly creating a square knot.



Repeat this square knot process five more times following the color pattern shown.



You can trim your leaf down a bit at this point if you would like.

### Step 3: Shape your leaf

Using a fine tooth comb, begin to comb the loose cords so that they unravel. Take your time with this part and be sure to separate each strand as best you can. Flip the leaf to comb on both sides.







When your cords are separated, spray the leaf on both sides with fabric stiffening spray. I like to get the leaf pretty damp because it makes for easier trimming and shaping. Comb each side to help the fabric spray coat each individual strand of cord.

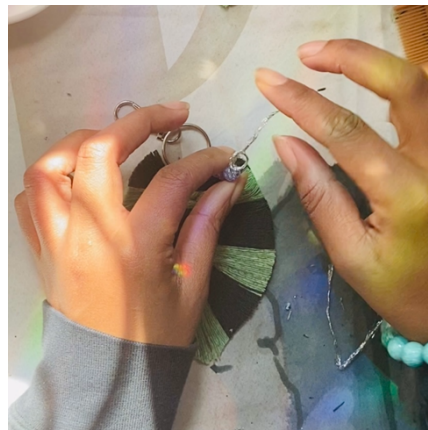
You can remove the tape now as you will want to hold your leaf to shape it. Comb and trim until you reach your desired shape and size. This is another part you want to take your time with. When combing, make sure your strands are nice and straight, and trim bit by bit so that you don't overcut and end up with a leaf that is smaller than what you wanted. You can also use the shaping guide included with the DIY kit found on my website ([doublerainbowdesign.com](http://doublerainbowdesign.com)) for an easier shaping experience.



When you reach your desired size and shape, give your leaf one final dampening spray of fabric stiffener and let it dry overnight.

#### Option Step 4: Add beads

If you want to add a little razzle dazzle to your leaf, attach a piece of thread onto your keychain and string on a few purple beads. And you're all done!







## AUTHOR Q&A

Kelly Barnhill has written several middle-grade novels, including [The Girl Who Drank the Moon](#), a New York Times bestseller and winner of the 2017 John Newbery Medal. She is also the recipient of the World Fantasy Award, and has been a finalist for the SFWA Andre Norton Nebula Award and the PEN America Literary Award. She lives in Minneapolis with her family.

Author Photo (c) Janna Fabroni

**RGC:** You begin Alex's story with in-world news articles and book passages about "The Mass Dragoning." What inspired you to introduce the event this way?

Barnhill: That's a really great question! I'm not sure I came at it with any sort of grand scheme or real intentionality at all. So much of how I interface with my work is by following my own instincts and curiosities and trusting that the Story itself will guide me towards the form and shape and texture that it wants. It is not unusual for me to create a heck of a lot of supporting resources while writing a book. What do I mean by that? Well, they can be anything – diary entries or newspaper articles or a recipe (with the notes from various cooks in the margins). Sometimes I'll have hymns or snippets from religious texts. Poetry. Children's games. Fairy tales that everyone in this world might know – or old wives' tales or urban legends or those nonsense truisms that everyone believes and no one actually has any evidence for. I write letters and grocery lists and scientific discoveries and invitations. These are usually written on scratch paper or old notebooks or post-its, and I typically sock them away in a box during the ramp-up period before I start drafting, as well as a way to dispel nervous energy or try to learn something new while slogging through those "sticky middles" that authors love complaining about. I'm not sure at what point I knew it was important to weave these side documents into the larger narrative. But once I found a place for one, I started finding places for many of them, and then they started to create a counterpoint narrative that harmonized nicely. I don't remember deciding to do this. I don't think I did decide. That's the nice thing about simply working in service to the story – the story is always way smarter than I can ever be!

**RGC:** Found family and sisterhood are such big themes of [When Women Were Dragons](#). What do you hope readers take from Alex and Bea's story?

Barnhill: It is my greatest wish that people see themselves and their loved ones in the relationship of Alex and Bea. Because all of us have it in us to love another person that much. And all of us deserved to be loved without reservation and without condition. Obviously neither of them are perfect, and both of them made mistakes. It happens. Sometimes we love people to the best of our ability and we still fail them. This is the truth and tragedy of human life. But it's our willingness to continue loving and learning in spite of those failures that bring us to a deeper place of connection, appreciation and joy. In my own life, I am a sister (the oldest of five), and I have absolutely loved being a sister, and it was a profound pleasure for me to spend time with these two sisters and bear witness to their relationship – their sisterhood as a force of nature, something bigger than themselves.



RGC: The feelings of female rage are as relevant today as there are in the 1950s. Why did you decide to set your book in the past?

Barnhill: I was driving in my car and listening to the United States Senate decide whether to appoint a gentleman to the Supreme Court who would surely (and of course actually did) take away a woman's fundamental right to bodily autonomy and self-determination. And this made me so viscerally angry that I thought my rage would set me on fire – and along with me my car, the surrounding cars, the whole street, the entire neighborhood and city, and eventually the whole damn country. Instead, I decided right then that I would write a story about a bunch of 1950's housewives who turned into dragons and ate their husbands BECAUSE WHY WOULDN'T WE, GODDAMNIT. And then I drove home and wrote the pages that would eventually become this book. Why the 1950's? Who can say. Perhaps because the 1950's were another time of forced containment and repression, the nation telling the women who had built the ships and welded the missiles and manufactured the bombs and flew the planes to allow victory in World War II that actually they weren't meant to be workers at all, and wouldn't it be better for them to return home, wear starched aprons and crinoline and make sure there was a hot meal and a martini for the husband who came home every day at 5:45 on the dot. Perhaps because what we learned then is that a nation that can take freedoms away is not a free nation at all, and sometimes, in the face of a culture who seeks to minimize and discount you, it is necessary for the individual to stop hiding their light under a bushel, and simply let it burn. In any case, my instinct was to set it in the 1950s and then the story unspooled just so, and who am I to argue, really, with what the story wants?

RGC: You've written about ogres, witches, cranes and dragons. Why did you decide to transform women into dragons? Can you tell us about why you love writing stories with a fantasy twist?

Barnhill: Again, these are not things that I decide. These are things that simply come to me, unbidden, and I do my best to write them down. I do think there is a curious misunderstanding of the role that fantasy has played in human storytelling over the course of our history. Realistic fiction is a fairly recent invention. For most of our history, our stories were rooted in the Fantastic – minotaurs in Crete and dragons curled around mountaintops and the worm ouroboros endlessly encircling the world. And I think this is a necessary and primal aspect of the human psyche. We need to tell of the world as it isn't in order to understand how it is. And we also need, from time to time, to be able to reflect on the fact that the universe in which we find ourselves is vast and strange and fundamentally unknowable – even the wildness and uncontained-ness of our own overheated imaginations could never hope to match it – which means that it is not only important but necessary to push beyond the limits of our own experience in order to prepare ourselves for an unpredictable future. The undiscovered country, if you will. It should not surprise us that our many technical advancements – from submarines to space stations, cell phones to satellites, artificial limbs to artificial intelligence – were all first dreamed up decades earlier in a science fiction novel. And similarly, it is through fantasy – the monstrous, the grotesque, the heroic, the sublime – that we explore the capacity of our humanity in extraordinary circumstance, and the resilience of the human heart.

Thank you for writing this wonderful book and sitting down with us, Kelly!