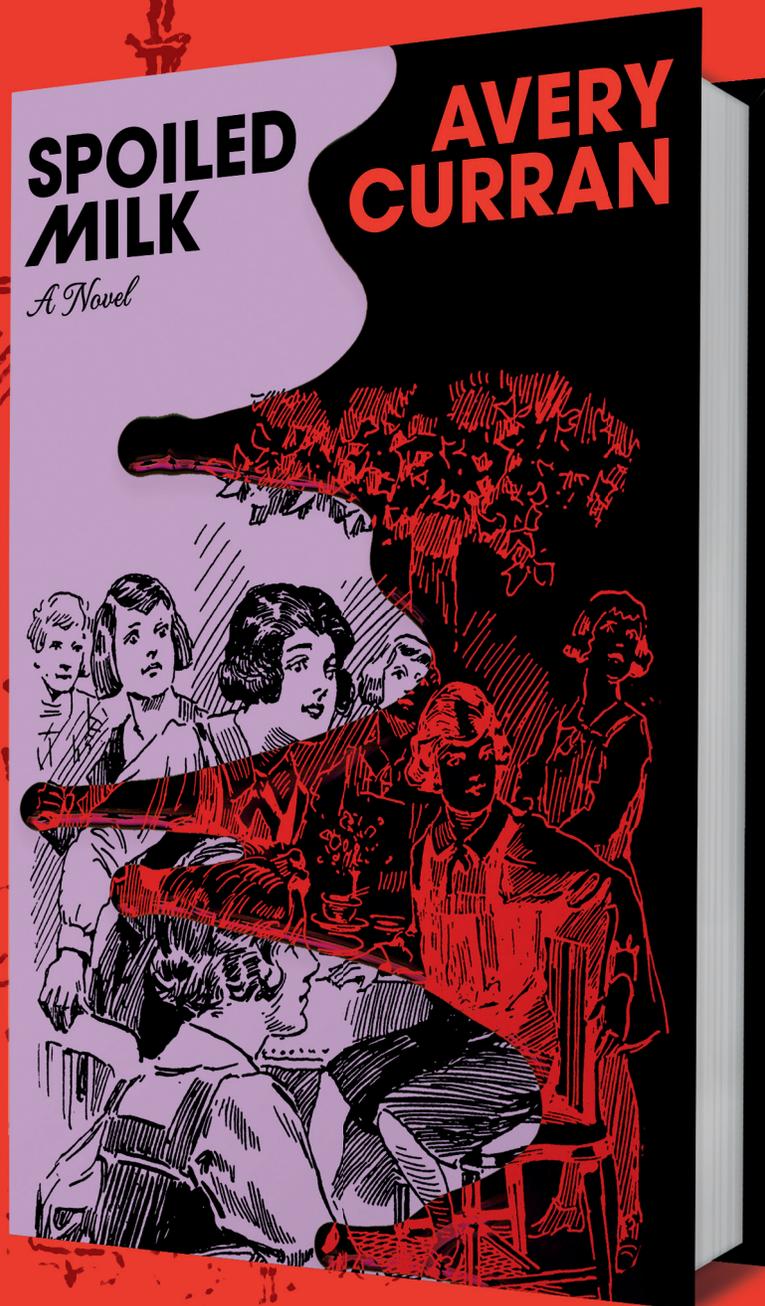


SPOILED MILK - AVERY CURRAN

Book Club Kit



Dear Reader,

Spoiled Milk has existed since 2022, when I wrote the first draft, but the seeds of it have been with me for much longer than that. It's surreal, to imagine that any day now it'll be released into the wild, like a soon-to-be feral child, into the hands of readers I may never know.

Spoiled Milk is, to my mind, in part a novel about desires that exist without and in spite of language. Not quite 'the love that dare not speak its name', but a love that has to navigate its way through the world without easy definition or explanation. I set the novel in 1928 precisely because of these possibilities for lacunae in language and knowledge, which my cast of sheltered schoolgirls experience so sharply. I wanted queerness to be always just out of reach: not a clearly delineated identity, but an indistinct spectre on the horizon.

Speaking of spectres, this is a book about spiritualism, and the pleasures and terrors of the intangible world beyond. Even to accept the most basic proposition of spiritualism, which is that the dead can communicate with the living through a medium, is to accept that the world has changed, that its rules have been altered. In the context of this boundary-shifting change, any number of other things might happen: long-buried secrets might be revealed, or, most pertinently in the case of *Spoiled Milk*, forbidden desire might take root and force its way to the surface.

Spiritualists often imagined the world otherwise: more just or more mysterious, more full of wonder. Even under the worst circumstances, like those in which Briarley School for Girls is entangled, there is something like freedom in it. I did my PhD on queerness in spiritualism, and I'm often asked—shyly, as though I'll be offended by the question—'But do you, you know, really believe in all that?' My flippant answer is always the same, which is that it's none of my business whether or not it was real. But my sincere answer is: wouldn't it be exciting if it were?

All this to say, this is a story that means a lot to me. These characters and this world have existed largely within my own mind for years now, and I am hopeful and excited to imagine readers—to imagine you—encountering them for the first time.

Avery Curran



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were your initial impressions of Briarley, Emily, Violet, and their classmates? What other novels does *Spoiled Milk* remind you of, classic or contemporary? How does Avery Curran modernize earlier boarding school novels?
2. Did you find Emily to be a reliable narrator? How did her biases influence you as you read on? How did memory factor into Emily's storytelling?
3. Spiritualism plays a major role in *Spoiled Milk*. How familiar were you with the history of seances and spiritualism before reading? What surprised you most about the communication between the dead and the living in the novel?
4. Several of the sixth form girls view Briarley as their primary home, which leads a few of them to remain on campus longer than they necessarily would have, given the danger. How did you relate to the novel's portrait of found family? Is Emily's trust in the school completely unfounded?
5. In Violet's absence, Emily finds herself reevaluating her friendships with the other girls in her class—which of Emily's classmates did you connect with most, and why?
6. What did you think about the space between the students and their teachers in the novel? Emily and Marion both express a desire to continue their educations after Briarley. What do you think you would have hoped for, if you had attended Briarley?
7. As Emily and Evelyn investigate the circumstances of Violet's death, their own relationship changes shape. What do you think might have happened between them, had Violet lived?
8. Emily and her classmates are young women on the verge of adulthood in 1928—what did you think of the lives these characters are being prepared for, by comparison to the world that we, the reader, know they will face? How did that inform your reading of their education and outlooks?
9. *Spoiled Milk* plays with elements of the gothic and classic horror. What does that mean to you as a reader? Did you feel the book fell more into one category than another? What do those themes add to the historical setting?
10. Now that you've finished, what do you think was behind the unsettling events at Briarley? Which scene was most frightening, to you? What did you think of the events suggested in the epilogue?

SPOILED MILK PLAYLIST

Press play. The author has summoned you.

1. *White Winter Hymnal* | Fleet Foxes
2. *The Infanta* | The Decemberists
3. *Miss World* | Hole
4. *Tonight You Belong to Me* | Nancy Sinatra
5. *Cold Hands* | Ezra Furman
6. *Ya Soshla S Uma* | t.A.T.u.
7. *Marrow* | St Vincent
8. *Hounds of Love* | Kate Bush
9. *Bury Our Friends* | Sleater-Kinney
10. *Spellbound* | Siouxsie and the Banshees
11. *Help I'm Alive* | Metric
12. *Death is not the End* | Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds
13. *Transcendental Youth* | The Mountain Goats



LISTEN TO THE FULL
PLAYLIST ON **SPOTIFY**

PRINTABLE SPIRIT BOARD and PLANCHETTE

1. Cut along the dotted lines.
2. Begin conjuring.





YES

SPIRIT



NO

A B C D E F G H I J K L M
N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

GOOD BYE