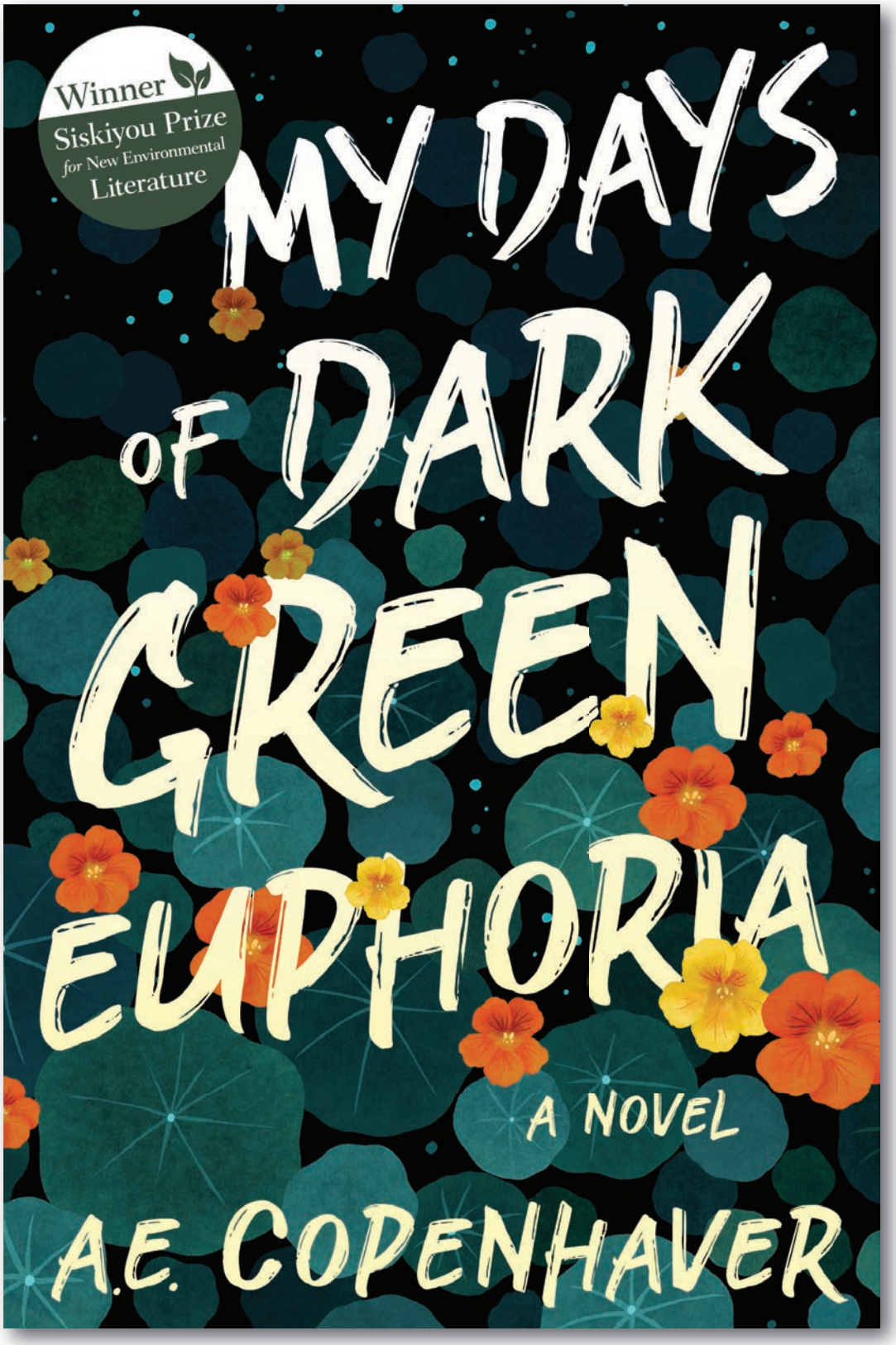
Book Club Kit



Suggested Discussion Questions

The novel opens with protagonist Cara witnessing her boyfriend Dan kill a harmless house spider. What are some of the other injustices Cara witnesses throughout the novel? Did any moments stand out to you as absurd or heartbreaking?

After reading headlines on her phone, Cara thinks, "The U.S. would choose not to participate in global efforts to slow the climate emergency. Alas, organic wine and artisanal nut cheese would never be enough." What does Cara mean here, and what do you think, according to Cara, would be better means of combating the global climate crisis?

Cara and Renée and most of their acquaintances operate under the premise that eating and using animals for food (or any other reason) is unethical. Aside from wanting to avoid animal cruelty, what are some of the other reasons they think it's wrong to eat and use animals?

What are some of the possible meanings of "dark green euphoria"?

Does Cara's critique of Renée toward the latter half of the novel have any merit? Why or why not?

What does it mean when Cara says, "Whoever remained, we'd take whatever was left of this Earth knowing all of it could be made better by those of us who celebrated humanity's capacity for a brilliant, revelatory compassion."

What moments led to Cara having her breakdown in Millie's garden? And what choices does she want to make to help herself recover?

After reading this book, would you consider making any changes in your own life? How have the characters' perspectives influenced how you see the food on your plate and our food system's relationship to the greater climate crisis?

Q&A with A.E. Copenhaver

Q: How did you come up with the idea for this book, and how long did it take you to write it?

A: I was in San Luis Obispo with friends and family, and the idea shot into my head so fast I had to walk outside to write the idea down as a note in my phone.

As soon as the idea was written down—something like "thirtysomething woman struggles with eco-anxiety and seeks solace and comfort in her boyfriend's mother"—I started writing (in the evenings after work and during lunch) what I thought would be a short story.

I shared the short story with one of my best friends, fellow writer, poet, and editor-in-chief of *Neon Mariposa Magazine*, Marisa Silva-Dunbar. Marisa watched my short story draft balloon from 5,000 words to 10,000 to 20,000, and before I knew it, I was writing a novel.

Once Marisa and I decided this was going to be a novel, I took two weeks to get an outline together. Once the outline was complete, I wrote 90,000 words in just under 90 days.

My routine involved taking an hour lunch break from work to write about 500 words. I would get home from work and do my usual home routine, and then spend another hour to 90 minutes writing an additional 500 to 1,500 words.

Q: What inspired the setting?

A: The setting of the book was inspired by many weekends spent visiting and exploring San Francisco's plant-based eateries and restaurants. Throughout those trips, I'd harvest details and ideas from people watching. Sometimes I would see someone walk by on the street and think, wow, that person could be Cara. Or Renée. Or Dan. There were a lot of Dans in San Francisco.

Q: What are the tensions that Cara is experiencing that make this book so timely?

A: Cara is trying to balance the addictive lure of consumerism as a solution to all our problems with the ever-advancing destruction of the natural world. On the one hand, it's very easy to participate in some "retail therapy," as it has been called, but for someone like Cara, she can't not see and feel all the greater externalities associated with that consumerism. She wants to participate in the human experience, but she wants to do so in a way that does not infringe on the existence of others—trouble is, nearly everything we do in this global capitalist society impacts and affects others, and often in profoundly damaging ways.

Q: What are some of the solutions that this novel explores for combating climate- and eco-anxiety?

A: Toward the end of the novel, Cara jokes about the magnitude of solutions we would need to put in place to survive and preserve humanity over the next 50 to 100 years—dismantle the military industrial complex, abolish industrial animal agriculture, essentially halt any and all industries that commodify people, animals, and the living world. But Cara also realizes that we have to look within our own communities, build up and revitalize our own communities to become more connected, compassionate, and resilient. We see Cara coming to this conclusion toward the end of the novel when she happens upon a community children's garden that she had never known existed. This moment in the novel is so important because it's about looking around our own towns and asking ourselves: How can I get involved; how can I contribute in my own way? Cara is in no condition to contribute much, given her mental state at the end of the novel, but she's getting around to it. And, importantly, Cara begins to realize

that contributing to our communities in our own special way is exactly what the world needs right now, and if we choose to put ourselves out there and get involved, even if it's helping kids learn how to water plants and care for vegetables in a community garden, we will begin to feel better within ourselves, and we might even find what we've been seeking all along, all while fortifying our communities against greater upset.

Q: What does Millie represent, and what does Millie's role serve in the novel?

A: Millie could represent a lot of different concepts, but I think generally she represents the ideal consumer in a capitalistic society. At one point in the novel Cara realizes that Millie's life is composed of "favorites"—favorite hair stylist, favorite butcher, favorite furniture company, favorite everything. It takes a lot of time and energy to become the ideal consumer, and once she meets Millie, Cara is wondering if this is what she should have been focusing on her whole life. Cara, though, is unable to become this ideal consumer because she has instilled within her this relentless awareness of the world beyond herself. This awareness is a burden to Cara, as she has not learned how to handle it in a productive or meaningful way.

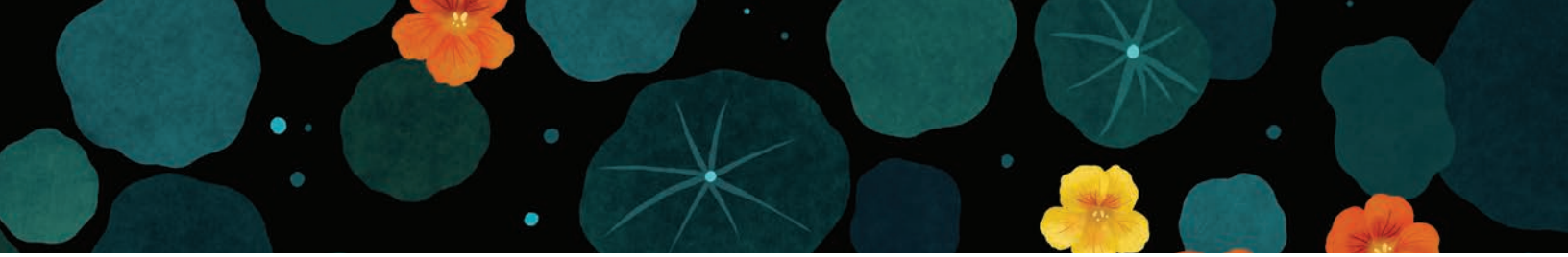
So, Millie represents to Cara the opportunity to try on this alluring consumerism and to see if this will give her what she wants. And, as Cara finds out, her time with Millie is not nearly as therapeutic as she had hoped. In this sense, Millie and her relationship with Cara come to represent the toxic cycle that a lot of us have had to go through in relationships, be they romantic or platonic, where we have to define our boundaries and set expectations and ensure we aren't participating in unproductive behavior patterns. And I think Cara comes to see that humans in general tend to be driven by very basic tendencies, tendencies that are easily perverted into destruction and devastation. But once we find the best ways to channel and guide those tendencies, we find our most rewarding life experiences.

Q: What is the role of vice in the novel, and what is Cara's relationship to those vices?

A: With Millie, Cara chooses to participate in some vices that our society usually tolerates, such as smoking, drinking, and eating too much junk food because they all provide instant gratification. Cara suspects this might be what she needs, so she goes ahead and tries on these vices. All these vices are played out against the background of the sixth mass extinction and the climate crisis, or what we might think of as greater societal vices—actions that we participate in and that collectively have an outsized, negative impact on our planet. For a while Cara is thinking, "Hey, this isn't so bad after all; I can be like everyone else!" But eventually, "vice" comes to be seen as our collective disengagement, shared estrangement from the living world and from each other. Vice then becomes for Cara everything we humans do that prevent us from reconnecting with each other, the living world, and with animals.

Q: Throughout the novel, Cara mentions, sees, hears, or learns about the plight of many different animals. Is there one moment with an animal that stands out as most significant?

A: Working at an animal rights and environmental nonprofit, Cara is exposed to some of the most graphic instances of violence perpetrated against animals. In one scene where she is learning how to interpret and catalog graphic undercover footage from a slaughterhouse investigation, Cara does have a chance to see how our society distinguishes types of abuse against animals, namely, the abuse that is seen as necessary to make more efficient the process of raising and slaughtering animals for human consumption. And that scene shows how these so-called "necessary" forms of abuse enable and perpetuate other types of abuse that the same industry would call egregious or even "violations" of animal welfare protocols. That's an interesting distinction to



make, and I hope that scene accomplishes that goal of showing that all abuse by humans, whether it's considered legal or not, is a form of violence and is unacceptable from the animals' point of view.

One scene about two-thirds through the novel shows Cara witnessing someone eating a fish. Cara uses her grief for this individual fish in that moment to scale up this single fish's suffering to invoke the trillions of fishes forcibly removed from the sea every year to meet global demand for seafood.

Q: This book tackles serious subjects—such as the climate crisis and the many other ways in which the planet is in peril—and yet its tone is lighter than these subjects imply, and it has so many hilarious moments. Why did you choose satire as a way to portray the issues in this novel, and how did you achieve the right balance?

A: My first experience with satire was reading Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in grade school and feeling totally thrilled—I thought, "Wow, is this even…allowed? How is he allowed to write this?" I was hooked from then on. I absolutely loved the concept of using absurdity to parody atrocity, which then places our actual behaviors into stark relief—so that what we believe to be normal (maybe it's eating animals or using people as a means to create commodities, whatever)—suddenly seems outrageous. There's something magical and satisfying in that formula.

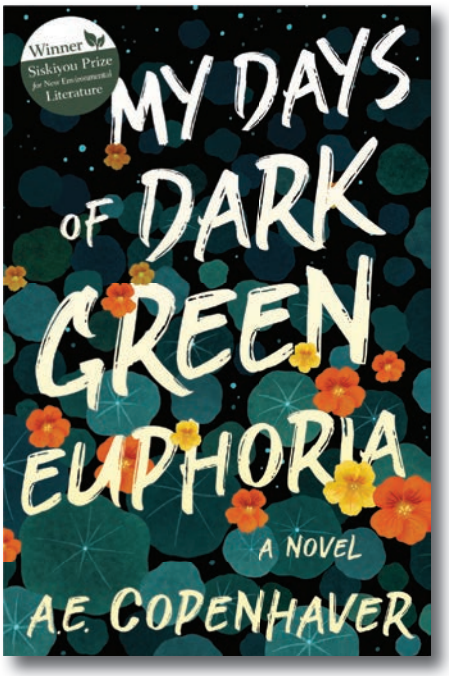
I also grew up reading the satirical newspaper *The Onion* with my family. I remember one *Onion* headline in particular that has inspired me: "We raise all our beef humanely on open pasture and then we hang them upside down and slash their throats." To me this headline (and the ensuing article) is pure poetry. The writers lay out all the horrific realities taking place in slaughterhouses right alongside all the humane-washed, green-washed, cruelty-free rhetoric that is pervasive in the meat industry—whether that's a small family farm or a concentrated animal feeding operation killing thousands of animals every day. It's up there as one of the most depraved spectacles I think we humans have ever allowed ourselves not only to tolerate but also to advocate for. As Dr. Melanie Joy explains in her book *Carnism*, we're raised to see killing and eating animals by the billions as "natural, necessary, and normal."

And I won't know for sure if I achieved the right balance—I hope readers will tell me their thoughts!

Q: What do you hope readers come away with after reading this novel?

A: First, I hope they enjoy it. I hope they close the book and think, I'm glad I spent this time with these characters, even if it wasn't always to laugh with them but at them. That's okay by me. And then I hope readers feel a tiny seed planted somewhere in their psyches. I hope they hear Cara sometimes, not complaining about the state of the world but talking quietly in her calmer moments about possibility, creativity, and what we can do when we work together. I hope it's fairly obvious that Cara sees much of the healing our world needs coming from a dramatic shift in the way we treat each other, how we see animals, and how we exist within our living world. And readers making more compassionate, community-building choices in their own lives, taking good care of themselves and others, are results that both Cara and I would enjoy seeing.

Praise for *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria*



"Awareness of ecocide, environmental devastation, and animal suffering might not seem the likely content for a madcap adventure. That was before *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria*. After the novel's end, the hero lingers in my consciousness, **a provocative and delightful presence** wiggling her finger at me: 'See, this is what it feels like.'" — Carol J. Adams, author of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*

"Take Esther Greenwood out of 1950s New York and drop her in 21st-century San Francisco, and A.E. Copenhaver has given us a *Bell Jar* for the eco-neurotic age. *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria* captures in equal measure both our rage and helplessness in the shadow of climate disaster and the banality of much modern environmental advice to tackle the crisis. In Cara Foster we have **a new sort of heroine**, a vegan-(and plastic-, and climate-) killjoy, steely-eyed, and yet compassionate toward the contradictions we face in living an ethical life, and also very funny! As a treatise on millennial existence, in bearing witness to the unravelling of our planet, corporate greed, the suffering of animals and nature, set against an alluring consumerism that traps us in decreasing circles of pleasure and shame, **Copenhaver has written an honest, witty, and refreshing cry into the night**. I enjoyed hearing a voice that sounded like my own thoughts — many times I thought, 'I've done this!' — and I know dozens if not hundreds of friends who will want to read this book. It is a difficult task for a writer to balance all our eco-anxiety with grace and humor, but Copenhaver manages it with no small literary flourish. Mind you, be prepared: You'll never look at rose gardens, straws or sushi in the same way again." — Alex Lockwood, author of *The Chernobyl Privileges*

"A.E. Copenhaver has achieved something very special with *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria*. From the very start, **this novel is captivating and takes you places you don't see coming**. The 30-something female hero is unlike anyone else you've met in fiction, and the darkly hilarious story is ultimately enlightening. It's a book that will stay with you long after you've finished reading it." — Robin Raven, author of *The Kindness Workbook: An Interactive Guide for Creating Compassion in Yourself and the World*

"***My Days of Dark Green Euphoria*** **encapsulates better than any other novel I've read the struggles faced by people living on Earth at this very moment in history.** While few of us go to such extremes as the protagonist Cara Foster, anyone who cares about the planet will no doubt see themselves reflected in her. Vegans especially will relate to her thought processes, her judgments of the world around her, and her struggles to cope with all the suffering she sees." — Wendy Werneth, author of *Veggie Planet* and founder of The Nomadic Vegan

About the Author

A.E. Copenhaver is a writer, editor, science communicator, and climate interpreter who has worked in the environmental and nonprofit sectors for almost a decade. She has ghostwritten book chapters about cities plagued by factory farming, air pollution, and automobile traffic, and she has written about migrating white sharks, threatened sea otters, and depleted Pacific bluefin tuna.

In recent years, she's been exploring how best to contribute to the global transition toward compassion and justice for all people, animals, and the living world. She holds degrees in English and environmental studies from Santa Clara University, and in 2009, she earned her master of arts degree in culture and modernity from the University of East Anglia in England. She moves back and forth between Eugene, Oregon, and Carmel, California.

Visit A.E. Copenhaver's website at
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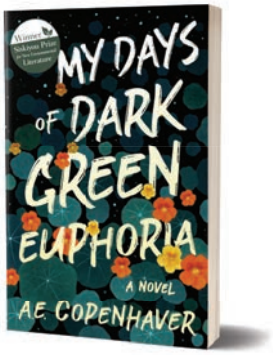
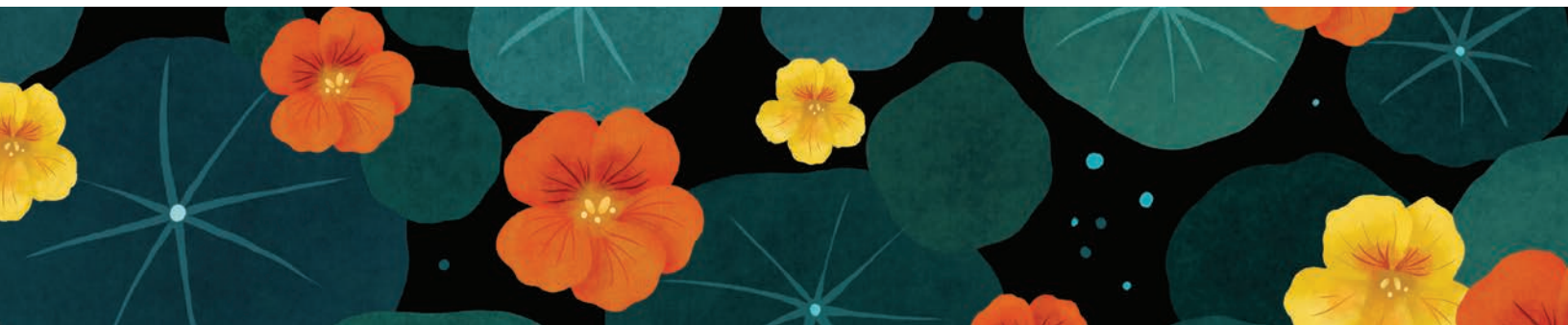
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