

“Chelsea Iversen’s magical debut is a story for the ages.”

—ADRIANA TRIGIANI, author of *The Good Left Undone*

THE WITCHES

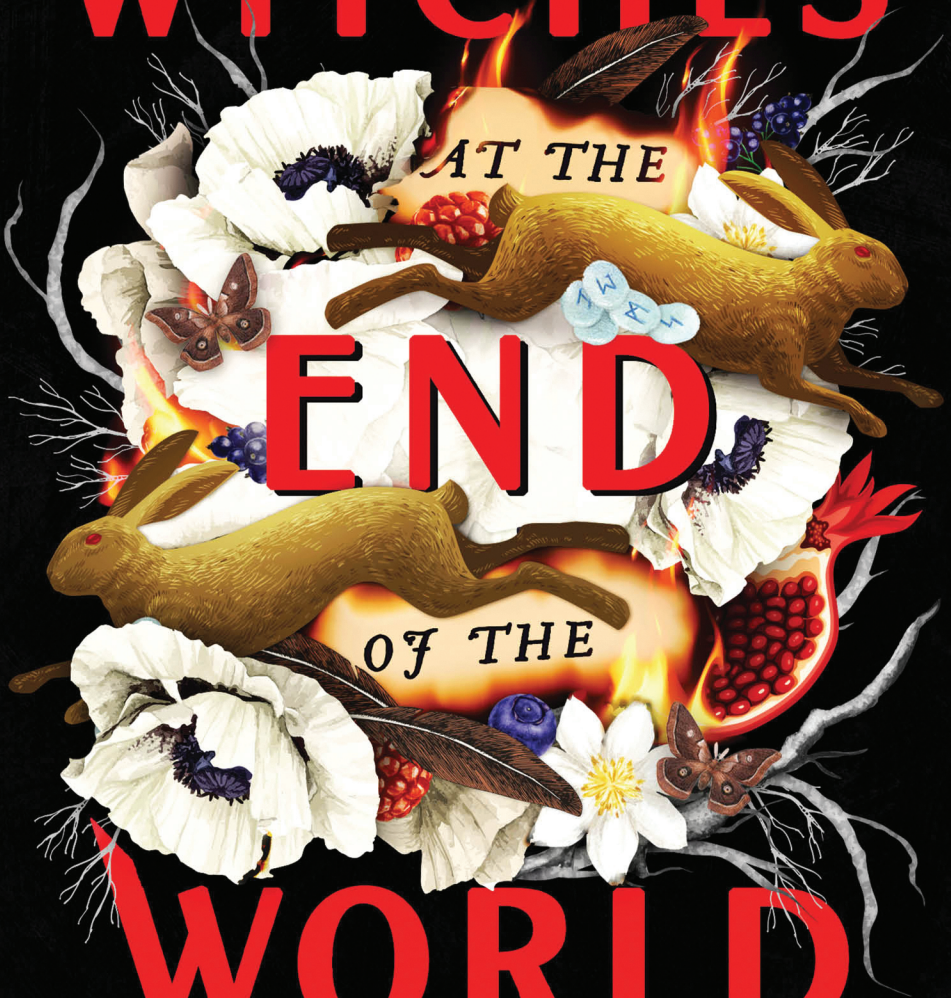
AT THE

END

OF THE

WORLD

CHELSEA IVERSEN



Reading Group Guide

1. What are some differences in Kaija's and Minna's magic at the beginning of the novel? What do these differences say about themselves and their relationship with each other?
2. Minna casts a dark curse on the village Kaija is traveling to because of her anger. Do you think her actions are justified considering what was done to her family? Why or why not?
3. Mormor tells Kaija that "Not even magic can temper pain in our hearts." Describe the ways in which this idea manifests throughout the story. How do both Minna and Kaija learn this lesson?
4. Minna sees an ominous vision of her sister burning at the stake. What emotions does this stir up in her? Given her animosity toward her sister, were you surprised at the actions she took throughout the rest of the novel? Why or why not?
5. Kaija is met with nothing but coldness from the townsfolk when she marries Jon. Why were they skeptical of her? If you were Kaija, how would you have handled being treated as an outsider in your new home?

6. Minna is quick to trust Olen and show him her powers. For someone who knows the hatred that people hold toward witches, why do you think she did this? What does this moment between them change in Minna for the rest of the story?
7. Kaija discovers that Minna's curse is behind all the deaths in the village, including her husband's. Though she's angry, in time she finds a way to forgive her. How did this make you feel? Do you think Minna deserves to be forgiven for her actions? More broadly, what role does the theme of forgiveness play throughout the novel?
8. What role does religion play in this story? How is the witchcraft of Minna and Kaija at odds with the Christianity of the village?
9. As Minna's heart begins to open, Kaija's heart begins to grow fierce. Think of all the ways that Minna and Kaija's positions have switched by the end of the novel. Is this the way you thought both of their stories would go?
10. Minna and Kaija call the powers inside them their "inner witch." Why do you think they speak as if their powers are separate entities? What do you think your own inner witch would be like?
11. Minna and Kaija end their story in the same place they began it: in the birchwood. What is different now about their home in the trees? Did the end of their story satisfy you?

A Conversation with the Author

Your novel takes place in such a unique historical moment and setting: Norway in the seventeenth century. What inspired you to write this story in this specific time and place?

The story of these two sisters whose lives were defined by their mother being burned at the stake came to me separate from time and place, in a way. Or at least, that was how it seemed. But I knew these sisters needed to live somewhere isolated, somewhere life was difficult. After doing a little digging about witch hunts in Europe, I learned just how intense the witch trials and executions in northern Norway were, especially for women, of course. I have Norwegian family heritage, so maybe in part that helped, but that remote, arctic setting felt like the only location this story could take place.

There are so many theories about why the Finnmark witch hunts were so intense, but one is that the isolated landscape and harshness of the environment meant that there were lots of natural disasters—storms and capsized boats and lean seasons—that seemed to require explanation. Witches were the perfect scapegoat, I suppose. Anyway, the zoomed-in look at human cruelty that happens in this story had to take place in the northernmost stretches of the European continent during a time when nature dictated that survival for anyone was not necessarily a given. To me, it seemed like the only possibility.

The magic within the narrative draws heavily upon Nordic myths and legends. What was your research process like, and how did you decide what magical elements to incorporate into *Minna and Kaija's* story?

Oh, I became completely obsessed with Nordic folk magic, diving into some really in-depth videos and books. The thing is, people have been doing folk magic forever, basically, because it's essentially been used as remedies for illnesses and childbirth and other challenges of being a human forever. Paganism is chock-full of folk magic, and Scandinavian history is chock-full of paganism. I knew I wanted magic that was closely tied to the earth and the elements—partly because I'm just naturally into that stuff but also because it fit the time and the place.

Some of the magic, especially the way the sisters used their runes and a few of the spells, was inspired by modern witchcraft and Wiccan-type practices, again because I'm into runes and alternative ways of seeing the world and because they're the kind of practices that are irresistible to me as a writer. They're so tangible and symbolic. I filled in some of the gaps with good old invention as well because, while I wanted to pay due respect to folk magic, I needed *magic* magic to happen in the story.

Oh, and weirdly, some of the magic the sisters use in the story came from a few of the actual written witch trial accounts from seventeenth-century Finnmark. There were certainly some strange depictions of what people thought witchcraft entailed in those accounts, especially in some of the “confessions” those accused of witchcraft gave (given under duress and torture, mind you). Sex with the devil, drinking beer with the devil, doing other weird stuff with the devil, and then turning into a bird and carrying out his evil here on earth—stuff like that. But there were some small “spells” that a few of the accused mentioned that I thought were more realistic feeling, and I did incorporate some of that into the magic *Minna and Kaija* used.

Did you find any parallels between Minna and Kaija’s world and our own reality while you were writing? Was there anything that surprised you?

Loads. Being outcast, physically or socially, from a majority group is a huge parallel. Good old-fashioned sexism, blaming others for things that have gone wrong, the desire to fit in, the desire to burn it all to the ground, the pain of losing a loved one to violence, herd-mentality (even when the mentality is completely absurd)—those are just some of the themes that I think came up for me. I am curious to know what parallels others discover as they read through.

Witch trials seem so distant for us I think. They seem particularly strange maybe because of the incredibly weird associations: *Oh, my cow died unexpectedly, and I am mad at you; therefore you are a witch.* And maybe, too, because of the undemocratic and downright unfair “trials” these victims faced. (Don’t even get me started on the water ordeal!) But if you take out the references to the devil and the belief in magical occurrences, really it’s just bigotry and power dynamics at play. The influence of power on what’s deemed right and wrong, and on who wins and loses, is incredibly relevant today.

Also, I hate that the term “witch hunt” has weirdly been turned on its head in our modern society and has lost some of its meaning. The people who were persecuted in the witch trials were very often executed. Killed. Murdered. I personally feel disturbed that we’ve extracted this phrase from its origins.

Why do you think Minna and Kaija’s story is important to tell, and what do you hope readers will get out of the novel?

One thing I was really interested in exploring was the lasting impact of our actions. If cruelty uproots your family, if violence is part of your history, then what are the implications for your future? I think each sister explores this concept in different ways, just as people today

explore their lives in different ways depending on their family or cultural histories. But people do not live in a vacuum. Not even Minna did. Her actions, though they may be reactionary, still have an impact, just like all of ours. I think the modern-day solution to this might be therapy and not, you know, deadly magic, but I do think reflecting on our actions is critical.

Another important part of the story, I think, is the impact of power. Clerics and religious leaders used power throughout Europe during this period to essentially bully pagan practices out of cultures. Now, this is super nuanced and dependent on the situation and people involved in all cases, and this is my own interpretation of historical events, but I think it points to something crucial: power is hard to see when it's doing its thing. And it can be incredibly destructive, be painful, and have lasting effects when it goes ignored and unquestioned for any period of time.

I hope readers will close this book feeling satisfied for Kaija and Minna, if not happy for them. There is a lot of moral gray area explored in this story, so it may not be a straightforward feeling, but maybe there's a message in there about choosing to be together instead of apart and holding ourselves accountable for our actions.

Or, if not all that, for those who have sisters, maybe just give her a hug!

What does your writing process look like? Are there any ways you like to find inspiration?

My writing process is eclectic. It honestly depends on what I am writing and what stage I am in. The first draft of this book was brought to you with the help of a hot and un-air-conditioned June, homemade chocolate (for some reason I thought this would be healthier...), and eight-hour power-writing days.

Edits were slower and more methodical. Historical and other

research happened a little beforehand but a lot during the revising process, once I really know what the story was. This is when the specifics begin to snap into place like puzzle pieces and I finally had that satisfied feeling.

Inspiration for me, honestly, comes from two things. First, I'm a naturally observant person, always have been. I'm kind of obsessed with what other people are thinking and feeling all the time. I've unintentionally been studying humans my whole life, which gives me lots of material for inventing them on the page. Second, I read and watch things. I become inspired by a surprising story structure or a beautifully written passage. And I love a good character relationship.

What are you reading these days?

Currently, I am reading *The Lighthouse Witches* by C.J. Cooke. It's dark and creepy, and there are characters (sisters!) of all ages that I'm connecting with. I'm also reading *The Unseen* by Roy Jacobsen, which is a book I picked up while traveling in Norway. It's a historical story that follows a family on a remote island and is the first of a series. It's simple and beautiful and clever. I highly recommend both books.