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## WHY WE LOVE *THE GONE DEAD*

Dear Reader,

When I first came across the blurb for *The Gone Dead* by Chanelle Benz early this year, it immediately piqued my interest. The story of simmering family secrets, insular small-town distrust, and racial tension set in the listless heat of the Mississippi Delta felt like one that I had to read, and I am so glad to now share and discuss it with hoopla Book Clubbers as our next Spotlight title.

In the early pages, Benz's main character Billie returns to the town of Greendale to claim the small shack she has inherited, and we learn of the double mystery that will drive the narrative: her father, a renowned African-American poet and civil rights activist, died there under suspicious circumstances when she was four, and Billie herself then went missing for days. Billie has no memory of this event, and it is this deep loss, this absence of memory, that compels her on a fateful path to get to the truth of what happened that night over thirty years ago, no matter the cost.

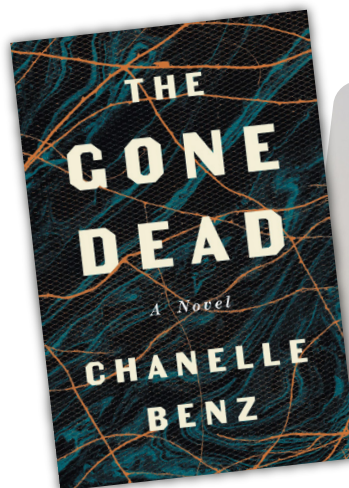
Though Benz raises many powerful issues that will animate any book club discussion, for me, the most powerful thing about this story is the way she slowly excavates the pathologies that afflict this community, that seem to linger in the air. As Billie searches for answers, she reconnects with family members and meets many white and black residents of the town. She finds a deep distrust, a reluctance, even from her Uncle Dee—her dead father's brother—to bring anything from the past into the light. A kind of decay seeps into our view of the motel parking lots, trailers, and dilapidated homes where the story takes place. Ultimately, we see that Billie's questions bring her up against the lingering wounds of slavery and entrenched racism that menace the characters and so easily ignite into violence. As the story progresses and more details of that shadowy night are revealed, Billie's struggle against these insidious forces continually raises the stakes and puts her in ever more dangerous situations. It raises the questions of how we can bridge such deep divides, the ways that trauma moves through time, and whether a type of justice can be achieved that might heal this pain. We picked this novel as our Spotlight title because these questions are important ones, and as relevant as ever. Indeed, as Billie searches through a crumbling, vacant building that was once one of her father's favorite bars, the space speaks to her: "Listen girl, everything you want to know is near, telling itself over again. The song is on repeat."

I hope you enjoy digging into this story as much as we did, and I know you will appreciate Benz's exquisite and revelatory writing throughout. As many reviewers have exclaimed, Benz is an exciting new talent that proves herself as an author to watch with this book. We can't wait to hear what you think! Share with us @hoopladigital, and happy reading!

-Tara Carberry, hoopla digital

### About the Author

**Chanelle Benz** has published short stories in *Guernica*, *Granta.com*, *Electric Literature*, *The American Reader*, *Fence*, and *The Cupboard*, and is the recipient of an O. Henry Prize. Her story collection *The Man Who Shot Out My Eye Is Dead* was published in 2017 by Ecco. It was named a Best Book of 2017 by *The San Francisco Chronicle* and one of *Electric Literature's* 15 Best Short Story Collections of 2017. It was also longlisted for the 2018 PEN/Robert Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction. She currently lives in Memphis where she teaches at Rhodes College.



## Selected Praise

"The southern novel will never be the same after this book. Billie James, the protagonist of *The Gone Dead*, holds more mystery, lyricism, tragedy, nuance than most characters I've read in recent years...Writers were not supposed to be able to do what Benz does in *The Gone Dead*." —**Kiese Laymon, author of *Heavy***

"A rich, arresting exploration of racial injustice and the long shadows cast by family legacy...Propulsive from the outset, culminating in a wrenching final scene...A beautiful and devastating portrait of the modern South." —***Publishers Weekly***

"Combines brisk plotting and striking characterization to provide a compelling read... Benz proves her virtuosity as a writer...Gripping." —***Booklist***

"Chanelle Benz has the power and grace to make the quiet stunning and the explosive beautiful. *The Gone Dead* is a wondrous exploration of pain and confrontation of its sources." —**Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, author of *Friday Black***

"Transports readers to the mucky Mississippi delta, where rising humidity and a few probing questions unearth a long-buried crime...An examination of racial justice and history—and whose versions are accepted as truth." —***Elle***

"[An] extraordinary new novel." —***Southern Living***

"Beautifully written throughout...Enthralling...Recalling Lalita Tademy's *Cane River*, this work will appeal to lovers of African American, Southern, and historical fiction." —***Library Journal* (starred review)**

"Chanelle Benz's prose is remarkable for its acute intelligence, flawless precision, and startling beauty. This wry, soulful novel reads like a thriller but an intimate one; it becomes both a genuine page turner and a deep character study." —**Dana Spiotta, author of *Innocents and Others***

"Wise and assured, Chanelle Benz's *The Gone Dead* plunges the reader into a fraught and complicated homecoming of sorts, the South you return to after a life away, a place you never really knew...Benz's prose is insightful and surprising, chock-full of beautiful sentences that demand re-reading." —**James McLaughlin, author of *Bearskin***

"I love this novel for many reasons, its fresh look at the hardscrabble Mississippi Delta, its varied voices that form a chorus around its main voice, Billie, and the mystery at its heart...[*The Gone Dead*] feels as old and rich as the delta soil on which it happens." —**Tom Franklin, author of *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter***

