

BOOK CLUB KIT

"A haunted history, a gory gothic, a forbidden romance."
—ALIX E. HARROW, author of *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*

THE HACIENDA

a novel

ISABEL CAÑAS



***The Hacienda* was born in a fairly unromantic place: rock bottom.**

By late 2019, I had struck out on submission with two young adult manuscripts in as many years. I was in Mexico City on my honeymoon when I received a particularly disheartening rejection; in my gut, I knew I had reached a point where I needed to try something different. I needed to pivot. I was nursing an idea for a historical novel, so I wiped my tears away and told myself I would try that project next.

A few nights later, I lay awake in the dark. As I drifted off, listening to a thunderstorm tire itself out, I heard a voice in my mind, crisply narrating what I instinctively knew was the beginning of something new. I snatched my phone off the nightstand and began typing frantically, racing to pin the voice down before it slipped away.

Those words became the first chapter of *The Hacienda*.

I wrote the first half of the novel in three weeks in November 2019, all the time I had before returning to teach at my university. Then, in March of 2020, the term ended abruptly; I returned home to New York City and stayed there, trapped in a tiny studio apartment, listening to sirens wail through the city's haunted, empty streets.

I hadn't worked on *The Hacienda* in weeks. *I cannot write it now*, I thought. *I am too anxious. I am too afraid.*

Fear, it turned out, was exactly what *The Hacienda* needed.

I tiptoed back into the book and was immediately consumed. I revised the existing material and wrote the final half in two weeks in April 2020. At five weeks total, it is the fastest I have ever written a book, and every minute was exhilarating. Never have I been so caught off guard by a project. Like a wild pony, the book twisted out of my carefully-planned beat sheets and dashed off into the night, dragging me along with it.

I treasure *The Hacienda* not only because it is my debut novel, but because it taught me to loosen my tightly-wound plots and embrace the unknown. It taught me to let go of the fear of rejection. To write the heroine I always wanted to read in a gothic novel: a woman who would fight her way tooth and nail out of that haunted house. I found my voice in its pages.

I also treasure the fact that I get to share *The Hacienda* with you now. As the pandemic

shifts and changes, settling around us like a scratchy and ill-fitting secondhand coat, I look back on that fear-laced spring of 2020 and think that this novel could not have become itself at any other time. It is, after all, a story about being trapped in a house. A story about battling forces we do not understand, about clinging to the people and tools we have to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe.

If you had asked me ten minutes ago if I would ever write a book about the pandemic, my answer would have been an emphatic no. But as I return to the book now, many months after having finished it, I shake my head. Oh, wicked San Isidro. You've surprised me again.

Dear reader, I hope you light some candles, turn the lights low, and allow this dark little book to surprise you, too.

Bienvenidos a Hacienda San Isidro.

Won't you come in?

Isabel Cañas



Isabel Cañas is a Mexican-American speculative fiction writer. After having lived in Mexico, Scotland, Egypt, and Turkey, among other places, she has settled (for now) in New York City, where she works on her PhD dissertation in medieval Islamic literature and writes fiction inspired by her research and her heritage.

PHOTO © KILIAN BLUM

AUTHOR Q&A

What inspired you to write *The Hacienda*?

The idea for *The Hacienda* first came to me as my novels ideas often do: as a vague constellation of archetypes against a backdrop of atmosphere, or vibes, if you will. I put together a playlist (included here in this book club kit!) and played it on loop to let my unconscious mind gnaw on the idea as I went about my days—cooking, showering, walking through the city, and traveling on subways, trains, and planes. A few characters fell into my lap: a young wife, a distant husband, a secretive family member, a troubled priest. I can be a superstitious person, but never about my writing craft—I plan everything weeks

(and sometimes years!) in advance. *The Hacienda* shattered that drafting process in a hundred and one ways, but its inception was pretty par for the course for me.

As someone who was quite sensitive to the spooky houses she grew up in, I think I was fated to one day write a book about a haunting. After all, we all have our theories about dark rooms and old, empty houses. *The Hacienda* was born because I was finally brave enough to share my own.

You wrote the book in five weeks, finishing it in a 400-square-foot Brooklyn apartment in April 2020. Did writing in lockdown have an impact on the story?

Writing this book felt like a fever dream. I didn't realize it at the time, but when I look back on my notes and outlines versus what the book became, I absolutely believe that is the case: *The Hacienda* would not have become what it is without lockdown (and the fact that I had just moved into a tiny studio apartment with my husband). Like many classic tales of hauntings, it is a story about being trapped between four walls—an experience that in 2020 became as frighteningly universal as a fear of ghosts.

The American gothic tradition pulls much of its inspiration from English literature. You've said, "When you're looking at a cannon



VICENTE GUERRERO, COPY BY ANACLETO ESCUTIA (1850)
OF AN ORIGINAL.

deeply rooted in English literature, there's a lot of overturning to be done." What do you mean by that?

As I wrote *The Hacienda*, I realized that the tone I wanted the novel to capture and its character tropes were deeply influenced by my reading of the gothic canon in my teens; no matter the historical setting, my book would be in conversation with that canon.

But not all conversations have to be cordial.

The skeletons swept under the rug of the canon gothics are ugly and many. Where did the money to build that grand, old house come from? (More often than not: colonialism and resource exploitation.) Whose ghosts are remembered? Whose stories are celebrated?

The Hacienda brings the trappings of canonical gothic to a new setting, but that setting was chosen with care: the immediate post-colonial environment in which the novel's plot unfolds throws many of these questions into sharp relief.

Which writers inspire you?

I write across many genres, so to give you a complete list would take all day! But when I think about *The Hacienda*'s provenance in particular, I trace my ability to write it back to several key writers. Many readers will already be familiar with Isabel Allende and *The House of the Spirits*, and certainly Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House*, but Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* was also deeply influential on me and my work—it is a

haunting classic of modern Mexican literature that I think too few readers in the United States know of. I also much acknowledge the immense impact that *Beloved* by Toni Morrison had on me when I first read it in university at nineteen. It was the first book I read in an academic setting that showed me that ghosts rattling around atmospheric houses were not just the provenance of English moors, nor of white men writing about New England houses with seven gables. *Beloved* taught me the language to articulate hauntings closer to home, to shed light on what has been cast in shadow by oppressors' history books. I'm still learning from Morrison with every book I write. I will never stop learning from Morrison.



THE BATTLE OF ALHÓNDIGA DE GRANADITAS IN
GUANAJUATO, SEPTEMBER 28, 1810, JOSÉ DÍAZ DEL
CASTILLO, 1910.

It's well known that the best horror speaks to our own fears and anxieties. Does this book speak to any of your own fears?

I wrote this book because I am afraid of two things: strange houses and the dark. Over the course of the first eighteen years of my life, my family lived in eight houses. I learned by the fourth of these that not all houses are the same. Some are still, empty, and quiet. Others have long, long memories, hung thick like curtains and so dense you can taste their bitterness the moment you cross the threshold. Turn off the lights, and my imagination runs loose.



AUGUSTÍN DE ITURBIDE AND VICENTE GUERRERO EMBRACE, SYMBOLIZING THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN ROYALISTS AND INSURGENTS. "ABRAZO DE ACATEMPAN." ÓLEO SOBRE TELA DE 1870, ROMÁN SAGREDO, MUSEO NACIONAL DE HISTORIA, INAH, MÉXICO.

Though *The Hacienda* is set in 1800s Mexico, it's in dialogue with many of our modern American anxieties. Tell me about that.

While it is at its heart a ghost story, *The Hacienda*

also grapples with colonialism, resource exploitation, land ownership, white feminism, and racial and economic inequality in the nineteenth century. Two hundred years on, none of these problems—which are both American and global—have been remedied. As a historian and a Mexican-American woman, I hope my fiction inspires the courage, anger, and compassion we all need to enact change regarding these issues today.

***Hacienda San Isidro* is the remote, mystical estate at the center of the novel. For readers, explain how the hacienda estate is set up and what its legacy is in modern-day Mexico. How do religion, caste, and color play a role?**

In the historical context of the Spanish empire in Latin America, an hacienda was a large, landed estate that was owned almost exclusively by Spanish-born peninsulares or by criollos, white Spaniards born in Latin American colonies. This created a system of wealth and resource exploitation that benefitted a small, white proportion of the population and entrenched profound racial and economic inequality that lasts to the present day. Whole doctoral dissertations could be written on the hacienda system's impact on Mexican history and its legacy! I have included a list of recommended monographs for the study of this period of Mexican history in the author's note of *The Hacienda*.

Above all else, *The Hacienda* is a terrifying, propulsive, read. Your agent said the manuscript gave her night terrors and visions of apparitions. Have you heard that from anyone else?

I'll never forget when my agent told me that! I felt a little bit guilty (she works so hard and deserves uninterrupted sleep!), but honestly, hearing that was a career high for me. It meant that my first novel-length foray into horror worked!

Horror is a genre that demands that the writer inspire deep feeling in the reader. Sparking fear and dread without the haunting music and jump scares that movies boast requires a precision and control of tone, voice, and atmosphere. It's not easy! A handful of my friends and early readers have also told me that they had nightmares while reading the manuscript. I can't lie—it delights me every time. Any reader who leaves a retailer or Goodreads review saying *The Hacienda* gave them nightmares forever owns a piece of my heart.

In addition to traditional horror tropes, mysticism plays a large role in the book. There is a priest who is also a witch, a housekeeper who refuses to work without burning copal incense, protective incantations, and more. How did these two genres come together for you?

The Catholicism I was raised with is deeply rooted in superstition, ritual, rules, and, above all, fear. There was the quotidian fear of punishment for

not following rules, for being different, or for rebellion, of course, but also fear of the unknown. So much of my early experience with organized religion was ruled by the omnipresent, existential dread of what awaited after death. Horror is a genre of dread, of atmosphere; as someone who was raised with dread alongside the theater of Mass, with its own incense and incantations, pairing horror and religion came quite naturally.



PORTRAIT OF HIDALGO (1905) BY ANTONIO FABRÉS (1854–1938)

You're a PhD candidate, and your dissertation is scheduled for eight days after on-sale. What are you studying? How do you balance writing a thesis and a work of fiction at the same time?

Ah, the unhinged laughter that erupted from me at the word “balance”! I am a binge writer by nature, be it academic writing or fiction—I spend weeks slowly gathering notes and outlining and then unleash the dam of writing. I have tried working slowly and steadily on two things at once and have found that I simply can't. Instead, I separate my time into three- or four-week blocks and binge either academic work or fiction. By the time I have exhausted myself with one, it is time to turn to the other, and the change leaves me refreshed and energized.

My PhD is in Near Eastern languages and civilizations. I specialize in Ottoman and Turkish studies, specifically the pre-Ottoman Turkish literature of fourteenth-century Anatolia, but I will be leaving academia once I defend my dissertation and graduate. The ivory tower gets a bad rap for toxic work environments and looking down its nose at academics who write fiction—frankly, its a well-deserved reputation. Fortunately, I have been enormously lucky that my academic adviser has been nothing but supportive about my writing career. He preordered *The Hacienda* as soon as I sent him the link!

At a time of economic and political turmoil,



HALF-LENGTH PORTRAIT OF AGUSTÍN DE ITURBIDE, EMPEROR OF MEXICO. 19TH CENTURY, PAINTER UNKNOWN.

Hacienda San Isidro is sustained by the pulque plant, as other haciendas go to ruin. How did you land on this plot thread?

I definitely brought my historical training to bear as I began to research the crucial, politically complicated period directly following the end of Mexico's War of Independence (1810–1821). I knew that in 1823, two years after the end of this economically disastrous eleven-year war, money was scarce. But I also knew that I wanted my novel to be shaped by the classic gothic trappings of a grand old house and a mysterious new, wealthy husband. So as I sifted through monographs and

nineteenth-century documents searching for the right setting, I decided to follow the money.

That money trail led to pulque. Like any crop, it was cultivated in specific regions in Mexico; I picked a region that was known for the production of pulque in the decades preceding the war. And then I went to work.

What has been the most surprising part of the publishing process for you?

As a debut, it seems like every time I turn a corner, I run smack into another surprise! I think the most pleasant surprise for me was how emotional I was when I first held the advanced reader copy of my book in my hands for the first time. Perhaps I should have expected the happy tears—there is a whole genre of Twitter and Instagram videos devoted to holding one's book in one's hands for the first time, after all. But there is simply nothing like it.



PHOTO OF THE BANNER THAT WAS CARRIED BY THE INSURGENT MILITIA OF HIDALGO AFTER EL GRITO DE DOLORES SEPT 16, 1810, CONSIDERED BY SOME HISTORIANS TO BE THE FIRST FLAG OF MEXICO.

HACIENDA SAN ISIDRO



Gates 4
ROAD TO APAN 23



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the beginning of the novel, Beatriz chooses to marry against her mother's wishes. If you were in her position, what decision would you have made?
2. What character did you relate to the most, and why?
3. Do you think that Juana or Ana Luisa were sympathetic characters? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe in ghosts of any kind? Why? Do you have any experiences that sway your beliefs one way or another?
5. Did you trust Andrés when he was first introduced? Why or why not?
6. What did you think of the novel's portrayal of religion?
7. Was Rodolfo a villain or a victim?
8. The Mexican War of Independence is a subject rarely taught in American high schools and universities. Did the novel's historical themes (class, land ownership, and race, among others) change your perception of Mexican history? How so?
9. Andrés has a close relationship with his grandmother. Is there a member of your family, perhaps of an older generation, with whom you are close? Have you learned beliefs or stories from them that connect you to your family's history?
10. Beatriz, Juana, and Paloma experience the world of Mexico in 1823 and the hacienda in different ways. What did you think of the novel's portrayal of female autonomy in this historical period?



PLAYLIST

Music is an enormous part of my writing process. I daydreamed myself into *The Hacienda*'s plot while listening to these songs and wrote while listening to them, too—sometimes on loop for hours! Because of that, these songs will always remind me of the characters of *The Hacienda* and the time I spent writing them. Here, I've arranged them in an order that reflects the atmosphere and emotional arc of the novel.

YOU WANT IT DARKER

Leonard Cohen

HE DON'T LOVE ME

Winona Oak

BERLIN BY OVERNIGHT

Max Richter, Daniel Hope,
Jochen Carls

BEE DANCE

Agnes Obel

NANA TRISTE

Natalia Lacunza, Guitarricadela Fuente

SEASON OF THE WITCH

Lana Del Rey

AGUA Y MEZCAL

Guitarricadela Fuente

BURNING INCENSE

Skott

ISLAND OF DOOM

Agnes Obel

MALA LECHE

Cami

BURNING HOUSE (FEAT. AARON KRAUSE)

EZA, Aaron Krause

CON LAS GANAS

Kurt, Cami

STRING REPRISE / TREATY

Leonard Cohen



TIMELINE

1797

AUGUST 27: Juan Andrés Villalobos born on Hacienda San Isidro.

1810

SEPTEMBER 16: The priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla's uprising sparks the beginning of the Mexican War of Independence.

1820

In Spain, the Spanish monarch Ferdinand VII is overthrown by liberals. Conservative royalists (predominantly criollos) in Nueva España, who had been fighting the insurgents for ten years, see new political advantage in independence from Spain as a way of maintaining their power. They switch sides; the royalists and insurgents form a new alliance.

1822

JULY 21: Agustín de Iturbide crowned Emperor of Mexico.

1823

MARCH: After an army revolt, Iturbide reconvenes Congress and abdicates. The empire is dissolved; a provisional government is founded and led by the generals Guadalupe Victoria, Nicolás Bravo, and Pedro Celestino Negrete. Iturbide is exiled to Italy, then England. (In 1824, he returns to Mexico and is executed by firing squad in the city of Padilla.)

1803

JULY 6: Beatriz Hernández Valenzuela born in Cuernavaca.

1813

Andrés leaves Apan for seminary in Guadalajara.

1820

WINTER: Andrés returns to Apan and Hacienda San Isidro.

1821

AUGUST 24: The Treaty of Córdoba is signed, formalizing independence from Spain. The Mexican Empire is declared.

1822

OCTOBER: Iturbide dissolves Congress.

1823

AUGUST 15: Beatriz marries Don Rodolfo Eligio Solórzano.

1823

OCTOBER: Beatriz arrives at Hacienda San Isidro.