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## READING GUIDE

### Jessica Westhead's *Avalanche*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Avalanche*. These stories and characters are very close to my heart, and I'm grateful that you've decided to spend some time with them.

Writing stories has always been my way of figuring out the world around me, and inside of me. It's a way for me to process and try to make sense of what I've observed during different phases of my life, especially the stuff that makes me anxious or embarrassed or afraid. But I'm scared of scary things, and laughing when I'm upset generally makes me feel better, and I also somehow remain (mostly) an optimist despite the bleakness of our world these days. So, while I'm inevitably drawn to write about unsettling and upsetting situations, I also desperately seek out the humour wherever I can.

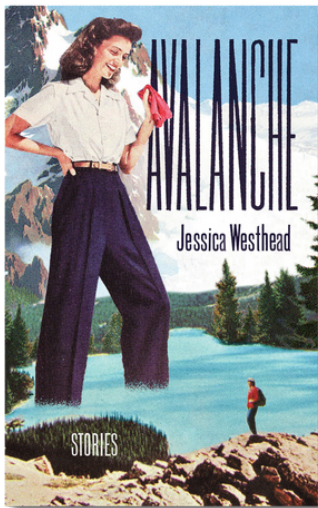
In this book, though, I felt very conflicted about using humour. These stories are about white people committing acts of racist aggression against racialized people. There is nothing funny about that.

And yet the behaviour of the middle-aged, middle-class, straight, cis white ladies I was writing about kept making me laugh. And I realized that, in part, I was laughing at myself. I still am. That laughter offers some relief from the shame I've been feeling since my own very late awakening to the ongoing reality of racism and white supremacy, and my complicity in it.

*Avalanche* is about the harm done by "well-intentioned" white people (in this book I focus mostly on white women) because of unconscious bias, and the polite, quiet kind of racism that isn't as widely acknowledged as the more obvious forms of racism committed by angry, violent, racist white men whose violent racist actions are clearly wrong—but that does just as much damage. The book also examines how white people continue to centre ourselves and our own comfort in conversations about racism and white supremacy and our role in it, to avoid our feelings of shame about this.

This behaviour is not okay, and I didn't want to write a book that excused it. But I did want to write a book that attempted to explain it. First for myself, and then—hopefully, ideally—for readers.

In my two previous story collections, I wrote about the humour that arises from awkward social situations. In *Avalanche*, I wanted to give readers of all backgrounds access to the awkward, frantic, disjointed inner monologue that often unspools in my mind when I'm in situations that call attention to my own racism. I wanted to write those monologues—and dialogues—that result from white women's anguished flailing to confirm our goodness, when that's not really the issue here. I wanted to map my own uncomfortable journey of growing awareness alongside characters who lack self-awareness—because that's always been my favourite kind of character to write, and because that became a way to impart something serious by ...



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... encouraging readers to laugh at the absurdity and obliviousness of my white protagonists.

That sounds a lot like satire, but I always hesitate to use that word when I describe the humour in my writing. Because satire offers a cushion between the behaviours of the characters and the reader, and I'm using humour in *Avalanche* to pull white readers in close instead, to recognize—and reckon with—those familiar mortifying parts of themselves. I want to offer them a mirror, not a cushion. And humour is a way to soften the harder edges of that mirror. Not to make us more comfortable—our comfort is not the priority here—but to tenderly and compassionately encourage self-reflection without judgement, in the hopes that we can move past this place of being consumed by shame and guilt and denial, which is not doing anyone any good.

I have never been a fan of holding my characters up for ridicule—I have too much love for them to do that. Their ridiculous and dangerous behaviour, though, is another story. Still, I didn't want to write a book that was a chastisement of white women, but rather an indictment of the systems that got us here. An examination of the label and identity of "whiteness" that was created to divide and separate us from everyone else. A call to get past this place where we're stuck, to more clearly perceive the systems that were designed to oppress racialized people, but also to oppress us, in ways we might not recognize when we're distracted and lulled by the false sense of security and superiority that our so-called whiteness gives us.

It needs to be said that none of my understanding about what I want these stories to do would've been possible without the work of the Black, Indigenous, and other racialized authors whose books and articles have illuminated so much for me, and without the conversations I've had with so many people—friends and colleagues, racialized and white. I'm so grateful for their insight.

Thank you for picking up this book and joining the conversation with me.

With all warmest wishes,

Jessica Westhead