

A Reader's Guide to

*Sleep Tight Satellite*  
by Carol Guess

Carol Guess is the author of twenty books of poetry and prose, including *Doll Studies: Forensics* and *Tinderbox Lawn*. A frequent collaborator, she writes across genres and illuminates historically marginalized material. In 2014 she was awarded the Philolexian Award for Distinguished Literary Achievement by Columbia University. She is Professor of English at Western Washington University, and lives in Seattle and Mount Vernon, Washington. Find out more: <https://www.carolguess.net>

*Sleep Tight Satellite* is an innovative collection of short fiction focused on chosen family and friendship, set in Seattle following the 2016 election. In these interlinked short stories, queer characters struggle to survive the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of Trump-era politics. In “Gun Safe,” a white woman discovers that her lover, a white police officer, may have committed a violent crime. In “The Vaccine Kid,” a woman leaves her lovers behind and travels to a seaside town to help a child abandoned in the pandemic. In “Sleep Tight Satellite,” a scientist tries to escape the state surveillance that comes with their job as a satellite engineer. The friends and lovers in *Sleep Tight Satellite* reject the violent pseudo-communities formed by police, government control, and technological surveillance. Characters create chosen families and survive political crises with intuition honed long before the Covid-19 outbreak. Told with humor and lyrical language, these stories invite readers to linger with characters they feel as if they’ve always known.

Praise for *Doll Studies: Forensics*

“Carol Guess’ beautiful, sonically-charged studies are dynamic, dioramic boxes of words, where the fictive and the real revealingly complicate causes and effects, where everyday objects are persuaded to disclose their deeper truths, and where ‘clues collect, but you’ve got to be looking.’”

-Geoff Bouvier, author of *Living Room*

“The paradox of proximity is in full force in Carol Guess’ brilliant *Doll Studies*. The miniaturization of crime scenes, the photographs of the details, and finally Guess’ investigations into these literal and psychic murders reveal the texture of suffering, and our attempts to frame the moments “between breathing and dying.” In these poems, “the idea is not to solve the crime” but “to see as at a museum”—and we do see, through Guess’ eyes, the startling beauty left behind like clues in wake of human violence. Overall, with Guess as our guide, we are given a stark tour of the end, and yet strangely filled “with peace because [we are] only watching.”

-Allison Benis White, author of *Self-Portrait with Crayon*

“Nuanced and surprising, beautiful and unnerving, the poems in *Doll Studies: Forensics* offer worlds inside worlds. Vantage opens up like a set of nesting dolls: poem to photograph, diorama to crime scene, past to present, representation to reality. Perspective shifts between witness, suspect, victim, and investigator as Carol Guess uses the void created by death to explore the details of what it means to live. Here, the known and the inexplicable echo equally inside our made and unmade rooms. Elegantly, insistently, these poems reveal the power of attention when curiosity is anything but idle.”

-Lisa Olstein, author of *Radio Crackling*, *Radio Gone* and *Lost Alphabet*

“Carol Guess warns us “What I wrapped for you is bleeding” and she makes good on it. *Doll Studies* presents a poetics of murder in which tenderness and horror equally exist. In these rich prose poems, Guess leads us into rooms where we should not be and has the gifts to show us the secrets that are hidden there. It is a pleasure to be haunted by this book.”

-Andrew Grace, author of *Shadeland* and *Sancta*

Praise for *Darling Endangered*

It’s commonly posed that history unwinds itself, that the events of a people or life reveal themselves to the eye, that the fibers of a story are made loose with investigation and discovery. The opposite, however, is true in Guess’s *Darling Endangered*, in which as you read you are closed tighter, sewn closer, bound better to the life and lives of the narrator, the narrators, the speakers of these stories. The words and images of these pieces—the stairs and stages and

studios, the kisses and misses—accumulate like coats, heavy and harrowing and grave, yet all the while precise, lovely, and true.

-Joseph Young, author of *Easter Rabbit*

Hand-over-heart, with pink beds, green plastic guns, clicksliver needles, and cardboard-giving milk, the fictions of Carol Guess's *Darling Endangered* are the most darling gifts. Even with their parasitic twins, they are not to be endangered. A lovely, lyrical must.

-Kim Chinquee, author of *Oh Baby* and *Pretty*

I love this collection of very short fictions. Carol Guess builds the most wondrous word-nests, each one holding something precious, each one surrounded by the world-at-large, afire. In remarkable lyrical fiction after another, Carol Guess writes her darling heart out.

-Randall Brown, author of *Mad to Live* and founder of Matter Press

Praise for *Tinderbox Lawn*

“This is such deep, rich writing. *Tinderbox Lawn* feels like dreams you forgot as you walk through your day but it's your life. I mean we never think as deeply as we live and Carol Guess tries to braid those strands and succeeds. I love being in this work.”

-Eileen Myles, author of *Sorry, Tree*

“*Tinderbox Lawn* will light you on fire. The music is broken glass; the buildings in flame. Even the language is bruised ‘blue and purple.’ Richly steeped in the violence of loss, these poems are a tea ‘so sharp it cuts teacups to shards.’ And one wants to keep drinking—for the war planes and train whistles, the queer girls in dresses, for Guess's vulnerable and unbreakable voice.”

-Jen Currin, author of *The Sleep of Four Cities*

“Carol Guess's poems are sexy, intuitive, angry, and hopeful. These lyrical narratives measure the impossibly small distance between love and fear. They are a reminder that we're all vulnerable little vessels filled by the people who can break us.”

-Zachary Schomburg, author of *The Man Suit*

## *Sleep Tight Satellite* author's statement

What to write when you can't sleep, when your country's on fire and even breathing is dangerous? I wrote much of *Sleep Tight Satellite* alone in the woods, in a house in the rainforest of the Pacific Northwest. I wrote these stories with trees, deer, and coyotes for company. I was in lockdown, teaching panicked students on Zoom, terrified by Trump's violent rhetoric. I wrote through misinformation, mask mandates, protests against white supremacist violence, and an attempted coup. Through it all, I continued to receive banal work emails reminding me of routine deadlines and duties. I wrote *Sleep Tight Satellite* because it sometimes seemed there was no middle ground between despair and toxic positivity, between the daily death toll and denial.

Although many of these stories came to me late at night living alone through lockdown, part of the collection was written two years earlier, living in a small second-floor apartment on a busy street in Seattle. The story "Gun Safe" was for a long time the heart of a collection I titled *Mock City*. Questions about violence, white privilege, gender, and labor continued to inform the book as I wrote my way through the shifting political landscape. As a white writer, as a queer writer, as a gender nonconforming writer, these stories illuminated questions I couldn't stop asking, questions keeping me and my friends up late, talking over coffee, over meals, then later outdoors, sitting six feet apart, masked, our eyes emotional.

When I create characters, I make them recognizably flawed. I don't see fictional characters as role models. Short stories aren't self-help. I want my readers to squirm when a character does something foolish; I want my readers to question their own intentions. My commitment to friendship, to my chosen family of friends, appears in the book as an unspoken code. I didn't want to write a book shaped around marriage, partnership, or dating. I wanted to write a book about the bonds of intimacy (emotional, political, intellectual, physical) between queer friends who have chosen to prioritize each other in ways cishet culture often fails to understand. Seattle itself is also a character here, constantly changing as cities do, inviting some people in while shutting others out. Over everything, technology's cold metal eye gazes out at what it generates, saves, documents, and destroys. The characters in this book struggle to use technology without being used by it, to see through the lens without being seen. In this way, *Sleep Tight Satellite* begins and ends with suspense, suspended between creativity and control.

## Questions for Discussion

1. How do friends and lovers in *Sleep Tight Satellite* build chosen family? In the world of this book, what are obstacles to creating intimacy? Which characters overcome these obstacles?
2. Discuss ways humor functions as social critique in one of these stories.
3. Although each piece in *Sleep Tight Satellite* stands on its own, these stories form an interlinked whole. Choose two characters from different stories whose lives overlap and discuss their connection.
4. Many of the narrators in *Sleep Tight Satellite* are unreliable. Their view of the world isn't accurate; they think they know more than they do. Describe the moment you recognized that one of these characters was an unreliable narrator.
5. Carol Guess is a poet as well as a fiction writer. Choose one of your favorite paragraphs and analyze it like a poem, focused on sound, syntax, word choice, and punctuation.
6. Stories in this collection range from long form to flash fiction. Choose one of each and discuss the way form intersects with content. How does time move differently in a long story; how do sound and repetition give flash fiction momentum?
7. In many of these stories, queerness is assumed; it's the norm. Describe the impact this had on you as a reader.
8. Analyze a moment where a character questions or relies on white privilege.
9. In which stories does the Covid-19 pandemic shape elements of the narrative? Which stories take place in The Before Times? Do any stories seem to take place post-Covid? What freedoms or limitations do these different frames offer both writer and reader?
10. Several of the characters in this book operate according to ethical codes unrelated to religion, law, or social norms. Choose a character and describe the code they seem to live by.
11. A few of these pieces are political or social satire. What is the author satirizing and how do these pieces fit within the book as a whole?
12. Choose a story that relies on magical realism. What's real and what's magical; how do these elements intersect?

## Writing Prompts

1. Have you ever been in love with a place? How did the dirt feel crumbling in your fingers; what color was the sofa; how did it smell after rain? Describe a place you loved or love now. If you can't feel the love, invent it—either the love or the place. Or both.
2. Friendship is crucial to *Sleep Tight Satellite*. Describe a moment when a friend delighted or betrayed you.
3. Solitude bleeds quickly into loneliness in these stories, then back again into reflection. Describe the feeling of solitude, then describe the feeling of loneliness by describing the same object. How are those two moods different and how do they influence your use of sensory detail?
4. Create a character using one detail from real life. Start with the detail, then build a fictional someone or something around it.
5. Think of a lie someone might tell. Now create both a character who is telling a lie and a character who sees right through it.
6. Wild and companion nonhuman animals populate these stories. Write about a human encountering an animal in an unexpected way.
7. Characters in this book often work very hard for money in unexpected ways. Describe the duties of a job that takes an unexpected toll.
8. There's a ripple effect to both kindness and unkindness here. Imagine a kind gesture rippling outward; describe its impact five or six layers out.
9. Describe someone doing something ordinary – buying a loaf of bread, walking the dog, visiting a friend – in the years before Covid-19. Then describe the same event during the pandemic. What freedoms or limitations accompany each frame?
10. Good and not-so-good neighbors play a significant role in several stories. Write a scene in which a neighborly good gesture saves someone or goes terribly wrong.
11. Several stories depict characters grappling with technological surveillance on the job. Write about the moment someone realizes they're being watched.
12. Describe an awkward encounter between two people that takes place on the internet.



13. Describe a moment when pandemic isolation seemed to be closing in on you or someone you know.

14. How would you raise a rage animal or a plastic baby?