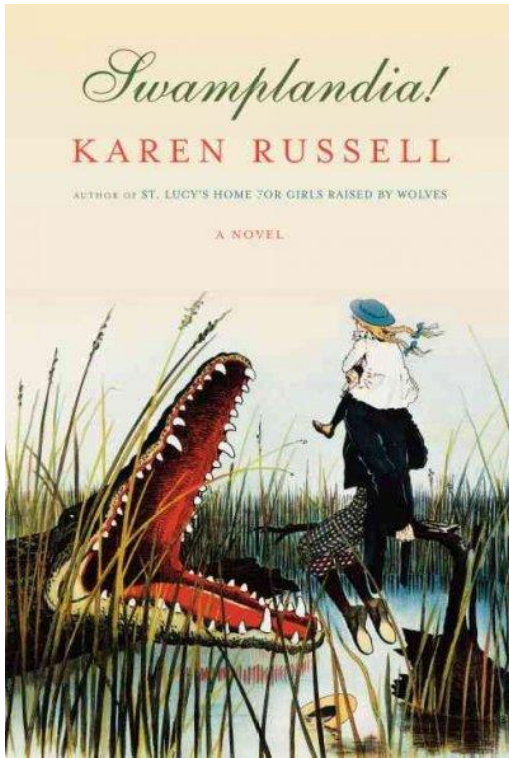


About the book...



The Bigtree alligator-wrestling dynasty is in decline, and Swamplandia!, their island home and gator-wrestling theme park, formerly #1 in the region, is swiftly being encroached upon by a fearsome and sophisticated competitor called the World of Darkness. Ava's mother, the park's indomitable headliner, has just died; her sister, Ossie, has fallen in love with a spooky character known as the Dredgeman, who may or may not be an actual ghost; and her brilliant big brother, Kiwi, who dreams of becoming a scholar, has just defected to the World of Darkness in a last-ditch effort to keep their family business from going under. Ava's father, affectionately known as Chief Bigtree, is AWOL; and that leaves Ava, a resourceful but terrified thirteen, to manage ninety-eight gators and the vast, inscrutable landscape of her own grief.

Against a backdrop of hauntingly fecund plant life animated by ancient lizards and lawless hungers, Karen Russell has written an utterly singular novel about a family's struggle to stay afloat in a world that is inexorably sinking. An arrestingly beautiful and inventive work from a vibrant new voice in fiction.

About the author...



Karen Russell, a native of Miami, has been featured in *The New Yorker's* debut fiction issue and on *The New Yorker's* 20 Under 40 list, and was chosen as one of *Granta's* Best Young American Novelists. In 2009, she received the 5 Under 35 award from the National Book Foundation. Three of her short stories have been selected for the *Best American Short Stories* volumes. She is currently writer-in-residence at Bard College.

Awards

Booklist Editors Choice 2011

Reviews

Booklist /*Starred Review*/

Russell's lavishly imagined and spectacularly crafted first novel sprang from a story in her highly praised collection, [St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves](#) (2006). Swamplandia! is a shabby tourist attraction deep in the Everglades, owned by the Bigtree clan of alligator wrestlers. When Hilola, their star performer, dies, her husband and children lose their moorings, and Swamplandia! itself is endangered as audiences dwindle. The Chief leaves. Brother Kiwi, 17, sneaks off to work at the World of Darkness, a new mainland amusement park featuring the "rings of hell." Otherworldly sister Osceola, 16, vanishes after falling in love with the ghost of a young man who died while working for the ill-fated Dredge and Fill Campaign in the 1930s. It's up to Ava, 13, to find her sister, and her odyssey to the Underworld is mythic, spellbinding, and terrifying. Russell's powers reside in her profound knowledge of the great imperiled swamp, from its alligators and insects, floating orchids and invasive "strangler" melaleuca trees to the tragic history of its massacred indigenous people and wildlife. Ravishing, elegiac, funny, and brilliantly inquisitive, Russell's archetypal swamp saga tells a mystical yet rooted tale of three innocents who come of age through trials of water, fire, and air.

Library Journal /*Starred Review*/

The Tamiami Trail, a two-lane road connecting the wealthy city of Naples with bustling, multicultural Miami, cuts through a river of grass known as the Florida Everglades. This wonderfully unique combination of wildwood hammock and cypress slough has been home to the mound-building Calusa, then the Seminoles, and now the quirkiest, most delightful group of all, the fictitious Bigtrees. A once-thriving destination for blue-haired tourists from the Midwest, Swamplandia boasted airboat rides and alligator wrestling until the death of the feature performer, matriarch Hilola Bigtree. The grieving chief fails to recognize that his kids are suffering, too. Osceola, the oldest daughter, communes with the dead. Kiwi, her brother, makes a pact with the devil, the Disney-esque attraction, World of Darkness, and precocious Ava secretly nurtures a rare red alligator, hoping to revive the family business. Like a kinder, gentler Carl Hiaasen, Russell manages to skewer all the Florida bad guy Big Sugar, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Casino Gaming Commission while writing a love song to paradise and innocence lost.

VERDICT This wildly imaginative debut novel, coming on the heels of the short story collection [St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves](#), delivers on Russell's status as one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists. A phantasmagorical tale of teens left on their own to battle their demons, mixed with a brief history of the Sunshine State, Russell's book will appeal to young adults as well as their folks.

Kirkus Reviews

A debut novel from Russell (stories: [*St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*](#), 2006) about female alligator wrestlers, ghost boyfriends and a theme park called World of Darkness.

Ava Bigtree is experiencing some hard times in making it through her childhood. Her mother Hilola, a world-class alligator wrestler at the family tourist compound Swamplandia! (which Russell always writes with an exclamation point), died of cancer, so business has fallen off considerably. Perhaps even more significant, World of Darkness recently opened and started draining away customers from Swamplandia! Because the Bigtree family business was on an island off the coast of Florida, no one in the family had much experience with mainland life. Ava, who narrates roughly half the book, would like to follow in her mother's alligator-wrestling footsteps, but her age prevents her from reviving the business. Her brother Kiwi joins the forces of evil, as it were, by taking a job at World of Darkness—one of its big draws is the Leviathan, a ride in which tourists slide down a seemingly saliva-soaked tongue of a giant whale—but also by getting the education he lacked on the island. Kiwi hopes to send money home but finds after meeting all the exploitative fees charged by his boss that he has almost nothing left. Ava's sister Ossie (short for Osceola—she's named after the Florida Indian tribe) starts paying close attention to the results of a Ouija board, finds an old dredge in the swamps near her home, and goes off with the ghost of Louis Thanksgiving, who had died in the swamps years before. Meanwhile, the patriarch of the Bigtree clan, known as the Chief, abandons the whole sorry business and finds a job at a mainland casino. The narrative becomes a quest of sorts as Ava, accompanied by a bizarre character called the Bird Man, poles through the swamps in a mythic attempt to locate her sister. Throughout this search, Russell evokes archetypal journeys through underworlds and across the Styx.

Quirky, outlandish fiction: To say it's offbeat is to seriously underestimate its weirdness.

Publishers Weekly/*Starred Review*/

Few novelists debut with as much hearty recommendation as Russell, a New Yorker 20-under-40 whose cunning first novel germinates a seed planted in her much-loved collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. We return to Swamplandia!, the once-thriving Florida tourist attraction where the Bigtree clan—Ava, Ossie, Kiwi, and the Chief—wrestles alligators. After the death of mother Hilola—the park's star alligator wrestler—Ava, the youngest Bigtree, takes her place in the spotlight while her sister, Ossie, elopes with a ghostly man named Louis Thanksgiving, and brother Kiwi winds up sweeping floors at Swamplandia!'s competition. Worst of all is the disappearance of the Chief, spurring Ava to embark upon a rescue mission that will take her from the Gulf of Mexico to the gates of hell, occasionally assisted by an unlikely extended family that includes the geriatric Grandpa Sawtooth, the Bird Man, and a tiny red alligator with the potential to save the park. Russell's willingness to lend flesh and blood to her fanciful, fantastical creations gives this spry novel a potent punch and announces an enthralling new beginning for a quickly evolving young author.

Discussion questions (<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>)

1. Now that you've read the novel, go back and reread the epigraph. Why do you think Russell chose this quote?
2. Some of these characters first appeared in the story "Ava Wrestles the Alligator" in Russell's collection, **St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves**. Have you read that story? How does it compare to the novel?
3. "'Tradition is as important, kids,' Chief Bigtree liked to say, 'as promotional materials are expensive.'" (page 5) Did the Chief show this in his actions? Which of the Bigtree tribe members paid the most respect to tradition?
4. How did Chief's myth-making affect his children? How might things have been different if he'd been more truthful?
5. On page 28, Chief introduces his theory of Carnival Darwinism, which he thought would save Swamplandia! How might it have been successful? Why wasn't it?
6. Where else does the notion of evolution come into play?
7. Belief --- in Carnival Darwinism, in ghosts --- plays a large role in the novel. What prompts Ossie's beliefs? Ava's? Where is the turning point in their belief systems?
8. Why do you think Ossie sees Louis and other ghosts, but never Hilola?
9. What does Ava's red alligator represent? And the melaleuca trees?
10. Why do you think Russell interrupted the novel for the story of the Dredgeman's Revelation? What exactly is the "revelation"?
11. There are biblical references throughout the book, especially in the World of Darkness sections. Why does Russell include them?
12. How do Kiwi's actions affect his family? What do we learn via his sojourn on the mainland?
13. On page 146, the Bird Man tells Ava, "Nobody can get to hell without assistance, kid." How does this compare to the quote from Dante that opens the chapter? What does it tell us about his character?
14. The three Bigtree children are innocent for their ages. Which one matures the most over the course of the novel?
15. The Bird Man calls the ending of the Dredgeman's Revelation "a vanishing point." (page 176) What does he mean by that?

16. Both the Bird Man and Vijay act as guides to a Bigtree sibling. How does each approach his role?
17. When Ava said "I love you" to the Bird Man on page 196, what did you expect to happen as a result?
18. On page 198, Ava recites a credo: "I believe the Bird Man knows a passage to the underworld. I believe that I am brave enough to do this. I have faith that we are going to rescue Ossie." Was she right about any of this?
19. Did the Bird Man believe in the underworld, or did he have an ulterior motive all along?
20. How does Kiwi's use of language change during the novel? What does it reflect?
21. Like the Dredgeman, several of the Bigtrees have revelations. Whose is the most surprising?
22. What is the significance of the Mama Weeds passage? What do we learn from it?
23. Why doesn't Ava ever tell anyone what the Bird Man did?

Readalikes

East of Denver by Gregory Hill

Dorsey, a rural community east of Denver, has seen better times. Stacey "Shakespeare" Williams has come back to Dorsey to care for his aging father, Emmett, and his failed farm. Emmett is obviously mentally unstable, and has lost his farm machinery and small plane to the bank. Shakespeare starts to settle back into life in Dorsey and reconnects with some characters from his past. There's Vaughn Atkins, who is wheelchair bound; D.J. Beckman, whose teenage delinquency has culminated in a career as a drug dealer; and Carissa McPhail, who works at the bank that seems to be the source of Dorsey's misery. When Shakespeare devises a plot to rob the bank and get revenge, his old friends are eager to help.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer

The imaginative story of Oskar Schell, an unforgettable nine-year-old with passions for everything from inventing to tambourine playing. But Oskar is also dealing with tragedy: his father was recently killed in the September 11 World Trade Center attacks. Left behind in his father's affects, the boy discovers a key that sends him on an odyssey of personal, spiritual, and cultural discovery in 21st-century Manhattan. This novel has been adapted into a feature film, starring Thomas Horn, Tom Hanks and Sandra Bullock (2011).

Geek Love by Katherine Dunn

Arturo Binewski and his wife Crystal Lil save the Carnival Fabulon from ruin by breeding their own freaks, products of Lil's ingestion of drugs, insecticides, arsenic, radioactive isotopes, etc. The story of this bizarre, perverse, grotesque, humorous, but also loving and tender menage is told by the dwarfed daughter Olympia, focusing on her own secret maternal love for her vulnerable "normal" daughter, Miranda.

Jamestown by Matthew Sharpe

Led by a certain John Ratliff, an unlikely band of settlers arrives in Jamestown, Virginia, in the 1600s. This familiar story of the first New World settlement is told in a completely new way, however: The settlers arrive from New York City and make use of text messaging. The author riffs off of history (Pocahontas makes an appearance), but twists it so it is unrecognizable, to comic effect.

My Latest Grievance by Elinor Lipman

Frederica Hatch has lived a very sophisticated but sheltered life. Her parents, David and Aviva, are both psychology professors at a small all-girls college. The good professors also act as house parents for one of the dorms. Articulate and outspoken, Frederica has benefited from the intellectual stimulation and security. As a teenager, this is a very difficult combination for her parents. Although her parents have been frank and honest in their childrearing practices, they forgot to mention that her father was married previously. As luck would have it, David's first wife, Laura Lee French, shows up and the college hires her to be a dorm parent. Complicating matters further, Frederica and Laura Lee become fast friends.

Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake by Aimee Bender

The enchanted tale of nine-year-old Rose Edelstein, who learns she possesses a very special ability. When she takes a bite of her mother's homemade cake, she finds that she not only tastes the sweet perfection of the dessert but also the emotions of the person who baked it. She is shocked to find the cake is filled with her mother's discontentment and unhappiness. This unusual sensory ability leads Rose on a journey of discovery--discovery about her family, herself, and the secretive, suffering nature of humanity.



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