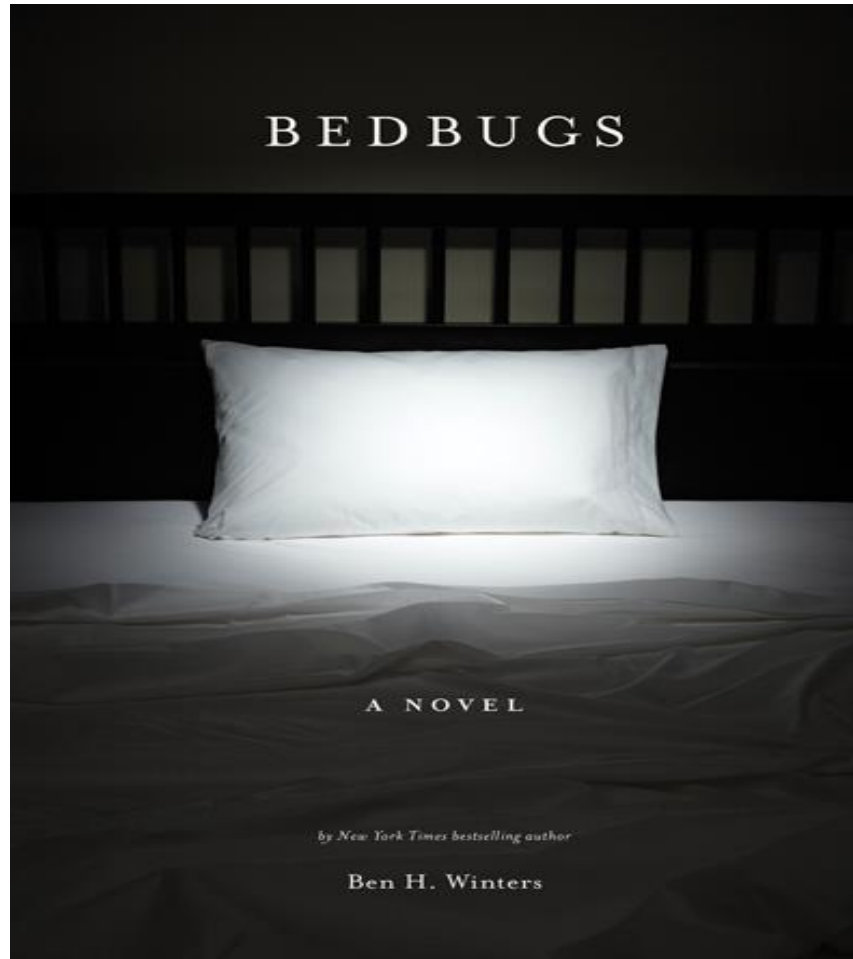


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BEDBUGS

Ben H. Winters

About the Book

Bedbugs is published by Quirk Books, and written by Ben H. Winters, who is a New York Times best-selling author, playwright and journalist. *Bedbugs* is a horror fiction novel, and this is the author's first foray into this specific genre. As the title implies, the subject matter of the book focuses around a creature that most cringe just hearing the name of...**bedbugs!**

The central characters the novel focuses around is a family unit comprised of Susan, her husband Alex, and their young daughter Emma. The novel begins as the family finds a perfect (almost too good to be true) affordable apartment in New York City's affluent Brooklyn Heights

neighborhood. Susan is particularly ecstatic about the small bonus room that the apartment provides, as she is an aspiring painter; in fact, she quit her job to focus on her art and sees this room as the perfect art studio. A seemingly innocuous comment regarding bedbugs by Alex early in the book, partly due his incredulousness at the extraordinarily low rent of their dream home, seems to plant the first seed for bedbug problems in Susan's subconscious. The family's landlord at the new apartment is an eccentric and high energy elderly woman named Andrea Scharfstein, who has owned and lived on the first floor of the building for many years since her husband Howard died some years back. There, the family is also introduced to Louis, a quiet and physically large African American man who has been Andrea's handyman for many years and seems to hold some secrets for her. At first the home is perfect for the family, but slowly a sense of dread becomes more apparent. Much of this negativity is amplified with Susan's persistent self-doubt, her suspecting Alex of cheating on her, along with her guilt of not working and staying home to be an artist while Alex is the sole bread winner of the family.

Bedbugs soon begin to manifest themselves in all aspects of Susan's thoughts, and she seems to be the only one directly affected. She begins to lose control more so after the quirky exterminator, Dana Kaufmann, determines that she does not have bedbugs. Susan's persistent thoughts of bedbug problems and of Alex being unfaithful are amplified by reading an obscure and almost conspiratorial book written not about normal bedbugs, but things called "badbugs." These "badbugs," which are in effect supernatural, soul-sucking, demonic creatures, can only be eradicated in the most horrific of ways. Susan's descent into madness intertwined with an unwholesome obsession with a "badbug" infestation cause her to lose trust with almost everyone and ultimately question her grasp on reality. The reader is repeatedly left with the question of if Susan's thoughts and situations are the product of a deteriorating mind ravaged by mental illness or if they are indeed her reality. This uncertainty of Susan's mental well-being culminates in a conclusion that will uncover the startling truth of the "badbugs" and the foreboding secrets they harbor.

Discussion Guide

1. Most people are not aware of the multitude of ways in which insects impact our lives whether good or bad (relative term) on a daily basis. On p. 110, Susan reads an article in the newspaper that explains that a certain co-op in the Upper West Side of town is having bed bug infestation problems. Susan skims the article and doesn't give it a second thought, moving on to the crossword puzzle, until she is directly impacted by them later in the book. What can be done in our learning institutions to make people more cognizant of the impacts that insects have on our lives? Why is it that insect news articles are mainly negative and fear mongering with less emphasis on positive versus negative aspects of insects in our daily lives? Why are they not more educational in nature?

2. After reading some of the bizarre text, *Cimex lectularius: The Shadow Species* (p.288), the book asks the question, "Why such hatred for fundamentally harmless pests- these tiny, non-

disease carrying, functionally invisible insects?” Is this an entirely true statement? What diseases have bedbugs been associated with recently in studies that could potentially be of concern to human health?

3. Susan has a reliance on diatomaceous earth for remedying a bed bug infestation after consulting with exterminator Dana Kaufman. Is it true that fiction books provide an unrealistic expectation on how to confront pests- in this case bed bugs? Trying to stop substantial bed bug infestation on your own using just diatomaceous earth is quite unrealistic. What would be examples of proper pest control methodologies for getting rid of a bedbug infestation?

4. In chapter 15 (p. 209), Susan is reading yet another article in the New York Times regarding bedbugs. This is supposedly a three-part newspaper series on the subject with the last one pertaining to bedbug sniffing dogs. The summation of this article by the author stated that these dogs were "[...] likely a scam, preying on the paranoid and anxious." Is this an accurate statement about these specially trained animals used in bedbug detection? Are these animals successful in detecting bedbugs and if so, how accurate are they in doing so?

5. The exterminator Dana Kaufmann is describing the life cycle of the bedbug (pp. 188-189) as well as questioning Susan about her bed bug problem. In this discussion, Kaufmann asks Susan if she has seen any "bedbug larvae," which are described as "little maggots or clear jelly beans". Is this an accurate description regarding the life stages of bedbugs? What is the life cycle of a bedbug?

6. The gruesome description of a bad bug feeding on Dana Kaufmann is described as “[...] a badbug flitted from an open cut on Andrea’s arm into the shattered wreck of Dana’s face, like a child cannonballing into a swimming pool.” (p. 444). Is this at all realistic in regards to how a bedbug would feed? What is the feeding style of a bedbug and do their mouthparts allow for this method of feeding?

7. In the New York Times article that Susan reads about bedbug problems in the city, the article mentions environments associated with bedbug problems including hotels, secondhand furniture and vintage clothing markets (p. 209). What are some common reasons for the increase in bedbug problems over the last few decades? What can be done to mitigate bedbugs being spread in industries such as hotels? What current problems are exterminators facing when confronting these insects, making them even more difficult to control?

8. The exterminator in the story, Dana Kaufman, is described (p.187) as a very masculine female. The author makes her seem very robotic, unsmiling, butch (word used by author) with no real personality. Does this give a negative impression about females who are in the pest control industry or are knowledgeable about insects?

9. Susan finally goes to her physician, who promptly diagnoses her with Ekblom's syndrome (p.275), or Delusional Parasitosis. What specific symptoms characterize this mental illness, and does Susan exhibit any of them? Who is more likely to suffer from this disorder, men or women?

10. Susan is obsessed with bedbugs and she spends every waking moment concerned about them. She scours the internet, finding many outlandish sites providing questionable facts. One such site (p.277) says that bedbugs "hide in the hair of their victims." Is this an accurate portrayal of bedbug behavior? What insect is the author confusing with bed bugs? What potential impact could misinformation or disinformation about these insects, whether pertaining to control methods or their behavior have on an individual truly affected by them?