



Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness
by Kristen Radtke

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Reading Guide**



Book Blurb

From the acclaimed author of *Imagine Wanting Only This*—a timely and moving meditation on isolation and longing, both as individuals and as a society

There is a silent epidemic in America: loneliness. Shameful to talk about and often misunderstood, loneliness is everywhere, from the most major of metropolises to the smallest of towns.

In *Seek You*, Kristen Radtke's wide-ranging exploration of our inner lives and public selves, Radtke digs into the ways in which we attempt to feel closer to one another, and the distance that remains. Through the lenses of gender and violence, technology and art, Radtke ushers us through a history of loneliness and longing, and shares what feels impossible to share.

Ranging from the invention of the laugh-track to the rise of Instagram, the bootstrap-pulling cowboy to the brutal experiments of Harry Harlow, Radtke investigates why we engage with each other, and what we risk when we turn away. With her distinctive, emotionally-charged drawings and deeply empathetic prose, Kristen Radtke masterfully shines a light on some of our most vulnerable and sublime moments, and asks how we might keep the spaces between us from splitting entirely.

KRISTEN RADTKE is the author of the graphic nonfiction books *Seek You* and *Imagine Wanting Only This*. The recipient of a 2019 Whiting Creative Nonfiction Grant, Radtke is the art director and deputy publisher of *The Believer*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Marie Claire*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's*, among many other publications.

[Visit Kristen Radtke's website](#)

Awards & Accolades for *Seek You*

Finalist for the Kirkus Prize in Nonfiction, an Eisner Award for Best Reality-Based Work, the Andrew Carnegie Medal in Nonfiction, and the Goodreads Choice Awards | Longlisted for the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award | An Independent Booksellers Association Indie Next Pick | Awarded a Whiting Creative Nonfiction Grant

Named a best book of the year by NPR, *TIME Magazine*, *The Boston Globe*, *Kirkus Reviews*, The New York Public Library, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Rumpus*

A New York Magazine, *Harper's BAZAAR*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, *Boston Globe*, *Daily Beast*, *Buzzfeed*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Observer*, *Refinery29*, and *Literary Hub* summer book

Press Coverage

Los Angeles Times [Review: Feeling lonely? Join the club with an intense new graphic memoir](#) by Heller Mcalpin

Chicago Review of Books: [A Simple Thesis in “Seek You”](#) by Taylor Griggs

AV Club: [How do we solve a problem like loneliness? In Seek You, Kristen Radtke looks for an answer](#) by Laura Adamczyk

NPR: [Loneliness Is A Communal Experience In ‘Seek You’](#) by Gabino Iglesias

Catapult: [Alone Together: An Interview with Kristen Radtke](#) by Eliza Harris

Craft: [Shaping, Containing, and Dissecting Emotion in Kristen Radtke’s SEEK YOU](#) by Stephanie Trott

Oprah Daily: [Kristen Radtke's Gorgeous Graphic Memoir Seek You Is an Essential Guide to Loneliness](#) by Michelle Hart

Other Works by Kristen Radtke

Imagine Wanting Only This (Pantheon Books, 2017)

Her writing and comics have appeared in publications including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Atlantic*, *GQ*, *Oxford American*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Themes & Recurring Imagery, Topics for Research

Loneliness

Isolation

Urban/rural/suburban spaces

Comics

Laughter and community

Cowboy myth and masculinity

Loneliness and violence

Mixed-media art

Art as communication

Creative non-fiction as a genre

Mental illness

Existentialism

Family histories

Ideology, interpellation, social construction of behaviors

Social control hypothesis

Gender and loneliness

LGBTQIA+ identities and loneliness

American mass shootings, gun culture, gun rights & regulations

Internet culture, “digital natives,” technology across generational differences

Rise of social media

Effects of social media on people

Surveillance, internet privacy issues (cookies, advertising, government surveillance)

Different disciplinary approaches to loneliness:

Evolutionary biology

Neurology

Anthropology

Psychology

Sociology

Philosophy

Literature

Gender and Women’s Studies

History

Music

Art

Reading Notes

SECTION I: LISTEN

“Our relationships to each other have shifted so forcibly that I have no reference for how we might acquaint ourselves with one another again.” (11)

“Loneliness is often exacerbated by a perception that one is lonely while everyone else is connected. It’s exaggerated by a sensation of being outside something that others seem to be in on: a family, a couple, a friendship, a joke. Perhaps now we can learn how flawed that kind of thinking is, because loneliness is one of the most universal things any person can feel.” (12-13)

“Strangers invade the monasteries of our minds.” (32)

“When I walk down a street at night and catch the corner of a bedroom beyond a window’s curtain, or see a woman fumbling for her keys on her apartment’s front stoop, I’m surprised by the longing I feel for the people I pass, and the homes I’ll never be invited into—or, perhaps more accurately, for the lives I’ll never live.” (33)

“How quickly, then, my annoyance at the proximity of other people turns into tenderness.” (34)

“The more I’ve watched companionless strangers, the more I’ve come to think that these moments are only lonely for those who are observing them. Perhaps we see loneliness in others simply to feel less lonely ourselves.” (36-37)

“Creating defines spaces around oneself was so foundational to the twentieth-century American dream that separation was part of its formula....” (42)

“The goal [of the laugh track] was to create the sounds of a room that the viewer wanted to be inside. A fabrication designed to make the unreal more real, or at least recognizable....The laugh track functions by coaxing a solitary viewer into a sense that she isn’t, in fact, alone.” (47; 56)

“The brain releases endorphins when a person engages in social laughter, suggesting that it’s used to build and reinforce long-term relationships. It makes us feel *good*, and we want to feel good again.” (53)

“Evolutionary biologists posit that laughter preceded language. Primates and early humans used airy, laugh-like panting to signal the advent of play. Deep, uncontrolled laughter remains the most animal sound humans make.” (54)

“Vivek Murthy, a former Surgeon General, has said that the most prevalent health issue in America is isolation. Loneliness will be classified as an epidemic by 2030. In 2017, a research team...found that those who reported feelings of loneliness were more likely to be dead by the time the studies were over than those who identified as socially fulfilled.” (63-64)

“For decades, epidemiologists lined up behind the ‘social control hypothesis.’ If no one is around to issue judgmental glances when we eat junk food at midnight or tsk at the days we spend in bed, of course we’ll be more unhealthy....But since the late ‘80s, rows of studies impart

that...The problem isn't so much in the time one spends alone, but in how one *feels* about that aloneness." (67-68)

"A hallmark of loneliness is shame: since childhood, there are few things more humiliating than being left out. Loneliness implies a flaw in us like no other longing or sadness does. 'I'm lonely' translates to 'I'm unlovable' or 'nobody likes me.'" (70)

"Loneliness isn't necessarily tied to whether you have a partner or a best friend or an aspirationally active social life in which you're laughing all the time. It's a variance that rests in the space between the relationships you have and the relationships you want. Loneliness lives in the gap." (71)

"Part of the reason you feel so bad when you're lonely is because your body is trying to propel you back into a state in which you can reproduce." (80)

"Anthropologist Robin Dunbar proposed that humans developed spoken language not to more effectively hunt or build or conquer, but to gossip. Gossip functions in the same way that grooming does for other primates. It creates bonds, and the bonds of language can extend further and more quickly." (81)

"There is nothing rational about this, but friendships often carry with them some desire for possession, in which a hope to belong morphs into a shameful urge for ownership." (82)

"The development of language brought about a fresh set of social problems, what linguist Steven Pinker put simply as 'a concern with one's reputation.' If we're going to maintain our position within a group...we need to feel deeply troubled when we observe minor social shuns so we can correct our behavior." (83-4).

"So many of these memories [of loneliness] centered on newness and moments of change, when recalibration leaves us without familiar tethers. They're often tied to catastrophe, or the empty stretch of time that follows." (88)

"Loneliness feels to me like being underwater, fumbling against a muted world in which the sound of your own body is loud against the quiet of everything else. The simple gestures you enacted so easily on the ground become laborious, pushing against a weight no body is built to move through." (104)

[Note the images and their relationships to Radtke's words on pages 103-11.]

"When we crave closeness, I'm not sure if what we want is something we used to have or a hazy image of what we never will, and I don't have an answer for what we do when we've lost the ability to do anything but tread water." (109)

SECTION II: WATCH

"Bootstrap-pulling, frontier-conquering, make-it-on-our-own ideologies are at the foundation of what's been coined 'American'. In America we do things ourselves." The myth of the old west's

strong-and-silent cowboy was so intoxicating to Anglo-America that it successfully sold cigarettes and Presidents....” (119-120)

“Contemporary male TV protagonists haven’t veered far from their hat-tipping roots, either. They drink hard alone in bars, eyes focused on middle distance, placating the unbreaking stream of attractive women who perch down next to them, unfulfilled and underwhelmed by what those around them can provide.” (129)

“Once someone enters a prolonged period of loneliness, they may move into a state called hypervigilance, in which they become especially attuned to rejection, anticipating or imagining it even when no rejection occurs. Everyone is perceived as a threat.” (135)

“If loneliness can cause us to lose sense of what is real, how do we function within a country that is constantly telling us what we trust and know cannot be trusted or known? If trust is the basis for the bonds we form, then its eradication can almost certainly ensure our separation.” (151-52)

“Researchers found that college students were more resistant to intimacy if they’d been told as kids about the questionable motivations of people they didn’t know.” (153)

“To arm ourselves is the most extreme form of separation I can imagine. To move through a life without weapons is another way to remain open to the world, and at its mercy.” (173)

SECTION III: CLICK

“Photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia has said that in public people often ‘present themselves as clichés of what they should be,’ even when they’re not posing for a camera. We perform for one another all the time, even when we’re alone, or when masked by a crowd’s anonymity, imposing the vantage point of a nonexistent viewer, pretending at life the way we’ve seen it onscreen out whole lives.” (187-188)

“Emily Dickinson called loneliness ‘the horror not to be surveyed.’” (192)

“Any new tool—a train, a telegraph, a television—can be used, ultimately, to escape, or to bypass those around us most immediately in favor of someone or something whose company we’d prefer elsewhere. By now it’s clear that waves of cultural nostalgia are so often geared toward reclaiming what never quite existed.” (201-2)

“Technology is an easy scapegoat, with disconnection attributed as the by-product of a digital age ripened by America’s growing narcissism, a society made sick by our abilities to filter and gild our daily narratives, cropping out the contours of ordinary life. But it seems to me quite possible that we have always been a very lonely people.” (207-8)

“When I scroll through friends’ or acquaintances’ feeds on social media, I often wonder how much of what they post is a representational extension of who they are. When I look through my own feed, I have the same question. What I mean is that I fear that through the act of posting about my life, I’m also fooling myself into believing it reflects what it’s like to live inside it—

just as I've sometimes told the same story so many times that the telling overtakes my memory itself." (215)

"From exploitative celebrity news to nosy neighbors to the gossip that sometimes fuels our friendships, people have felt they had a right to others' stories long before the internet offered a place to do so in such a sprawling, public fashion. This is foundational to storytelling itself. Stories are how we draw ourselves closer to one another, and how we remember, and sometimes how we reshape." (232)

SECTION IV: TOUCH

"Just as they've heard tales of solitary cowboys on the open frontier, so too have American children been told stories about lonely women: orphaned Cinderella's only companions are friendly birds and mice; Ariel longs for more than her underwater life; Aurora, Jasmine, and Pocahontas are cordoned off from outsiders by their fearful fathers. Rapunzel is locked in her tower, Snow White lies in a glass case. A princess is coveted because she is trapped and untouched, sexy but conquerable because she's remained unaware of her beauty and her body by the circumstances of her confinement." (254)

"Lonely people tend to scoop out larger spaces of isolation to burrow into by cutting themselves off from others—triggering the self-fulfilling prophecy of preventing rejection by avoiding opportunities for connection." (288)

"Psychologists call our appetite for human touch 'skin hunger.' It's an odd and beautiful name that connotes not a want but a need. When we are hungry we must eat. So, too, is the body's desire for touch designed to bring us toward another person, because so much—our immune system, our hormone release, our mental health—relies in part on human contact to continue functioning as it should." (294)

Discussion Questions

When you think of loneliness, what first comes to mind as a knee-jerk response to the idea?

What memory do you have of loneliness in stark detail? (See the stories on pages 89-94.)

What makes you feel lonely?

What makes you feel *not* lonely?

What is the difference, to you, between being alone and being lonely?

How would you characterize your relationship to the internet, social media, or digital technology in general? What do you think about that? Is there anything you would like to change?

Which quotations or passages from the book (either from the above or from your own reading) strike you the most? Why is that?