

A Taste for Cannibalism?

A spate of recent stomach-churning books, TV shows and films suggests we've never looked so delicious — to one another.



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130





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An image came to Chelsea G. Summers: a boyfriend, accidentally on purpose hit by a car, some quick work with a corkscrew and his liver served Tuscan style, on toast.

That figment of her twisted imagination is what prompted Ms. Summers to write her novel, “[A Certain Hunger](#),” about a restaurant critic with a taste for (male) human flesh.

Turns out, cannibalism has a time and a place. In the pages of some recent stomach-churning books, and on television and film screens, Ms. Summers and others suggest that that time is now.

There is “[Yellowjackets](#),” a Showtime series about a high school women’s soccer team stranded in the woods for a few months too many, which premiered in November. The film “[Fresh](#),” released on Hulu in March, involves an underground human meat trade for the rich.

“[Lapvona](#),” Ottessa Moshfegh’s novel published in June, portrays cannibalism in a medieval village overcome by plague and drought. Agustina Bazterrica’s book “[Tender Is the Flesh](#),” released in English in 2020 and in Spanish in 2017, imagines a future society that farms humans like cattle. Also out in 2017, “[Raw](#),” a film by the director and screenwriter Julia Ducournau, tells the story of a vegetarian veterinary student whose taste for meat escalates after consuming raw offal.

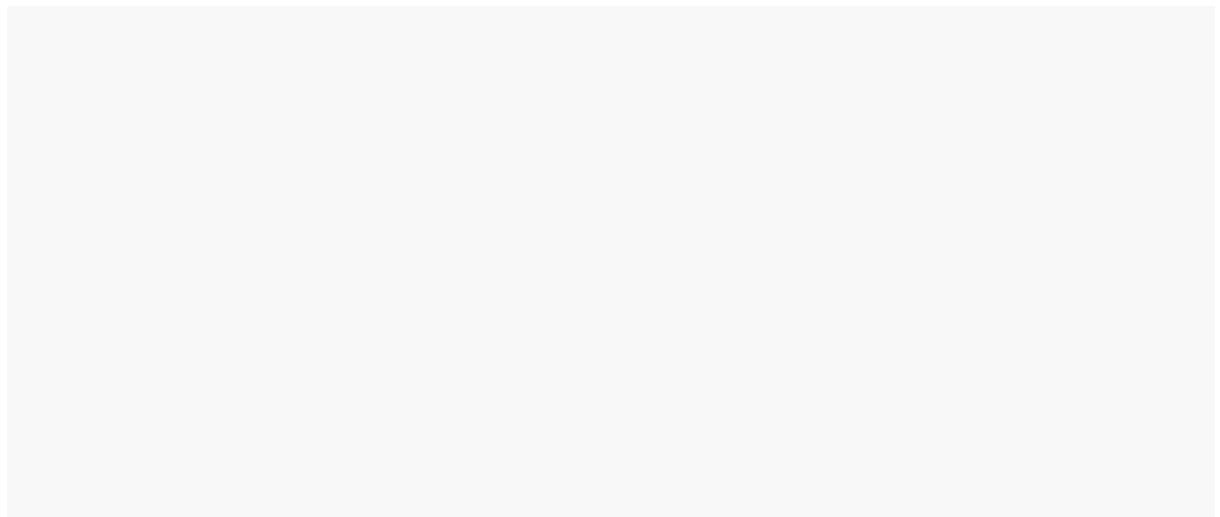
Still to come is “Bones and All,” starring Timothée Chalamet. The movie, about a young love that becomes a lust for human consumption, is expected to be released later this year or early next. Its director, Luca Guadagnino, [has called](#) the story “extremely romantic.”

Can You Stomach It?

A fascination with cannibalism, perhaps not surprisingly, can toe a fine line, as Ms. Summers learned while writing “A Certain Hunger.”

When fact checkers came calling about the frenzied scenes in which the book’s antiheroine prepares her murdered lovers with grotesque, epicurean flourish, their queries about the intricacies of human butchery left Ms. Summers so disturbed that she went “full raw vegan for two weeks.” The creator was horrified by her own monster.

Publishers may have been, too. When Ms. Summers, who uses a pseudonym, was shopping the book around in 2018, it was rejected more than 20 times before Audible and the Unnamed Press made an offer.



The tension in “Yellowjackets” is in the knowledge that you know cannibalism is coming, but when? And why? Showtime

If she were selling “A Certain Hunger” today, Ms. Summers, who is 59 and lives in New York and Stockholm, believes it would be easier. “God bless ‘Yellowjackets,’” she said in a Zoom interview, which was later interrupted by her dog, Bob, vomiting in the background.

Released in December 2020, her book started to experience a boom in popularity on social media — the actress Anya Taylor-Joy posted about it on [Instagram](#), and it received many plaudits in the [corner of TikTok known as BookTok](#) — about a year later, around the time that “Yellowjackets” debuted on Showtime.

The pilot episode of “Yellowjackets” shows a teenage girl getting trapped, bled out like a deer and served on a platter in a terrifying ritual.

Bloodthirsty fans continue to dissect the scene on Reddit, where a [subreddit](#) message board dedicated to the series has more than 51,000 members.

The show's tension is in the knowledge that you know cannibalism is coming, but when? And why?

The creators of "Yellowjackets," Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, who live in Los Angeles, say they wanted the plot to hint that human consumption wasn't merely for the characters' survival. This not only adds a spine-tingling creepiness to the already dark story about the soccer team stranded in the wilderness, but also separates it from the real-life tale of a Uruguayan rugby team trapped in the Andes in 1972, whose members resorted to cannibalism to survive. (That event was later dramatized in a 1993 movie, "Alive," starring Ethan Hawke.)

"I think we're often drawn to the things that repulse us the most," Ms. Lyle, 42, said. Mr. Nickerson, 43, chimed in: "But I keep coming back to this idea of, what portion of our revulsion to these things is a fear of the ecstasy of them?"

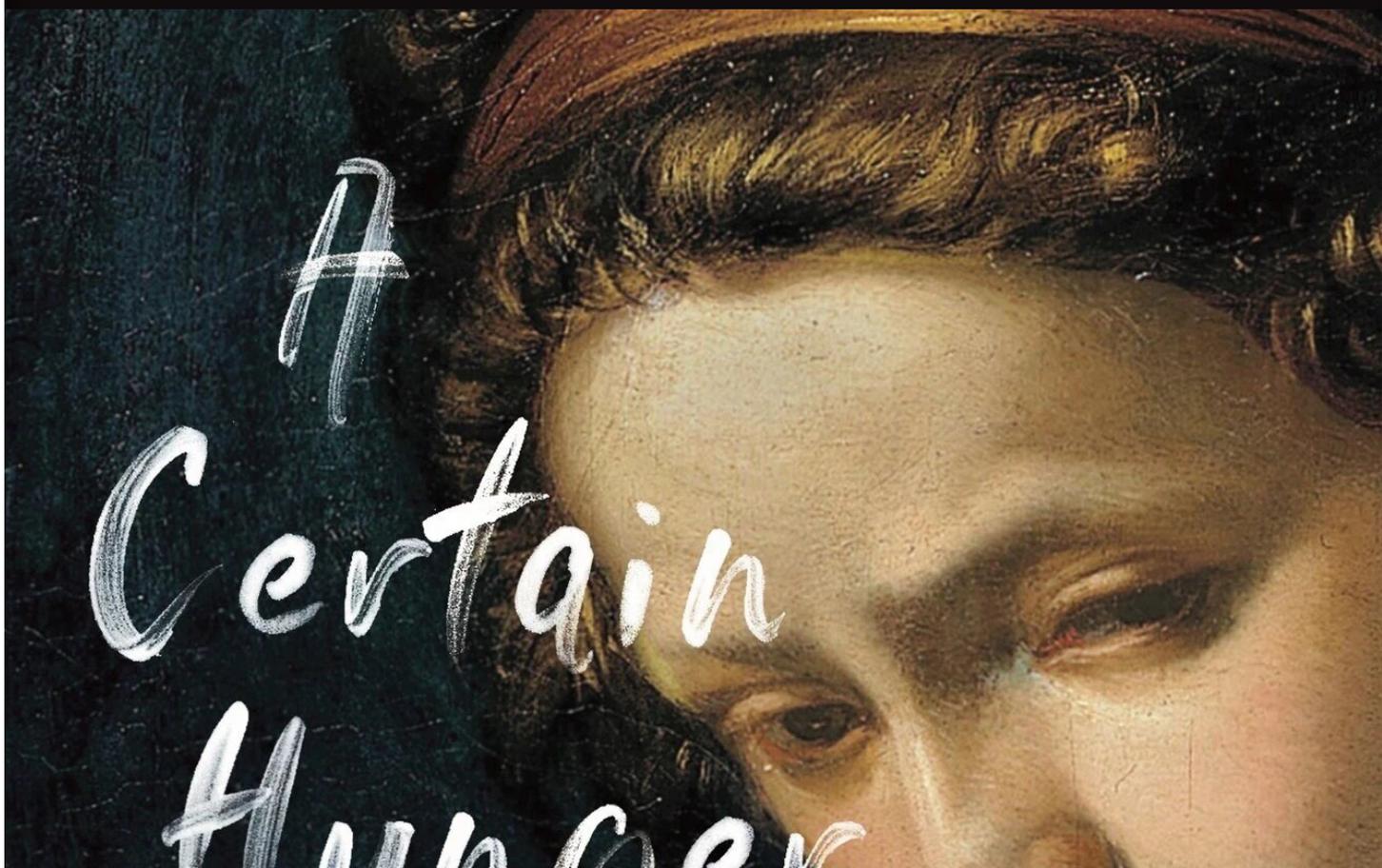
The image shows the front cover of the novel 'LAPVONA'. The title 'LAPVONA' is written in large, bold, blue, serif capital letters. Below it, the subtitle 'A NOVEL' is written in smaller, blue, outlined, sans-serif capital letters. The background is solid black. At the bottom edge, there is a small, blurry, brownish texture that appears to be a close-up of a person's hair or skin.

LAPVONA

A NOVEL



OTTESSA MOSHFEGH



Harvey

a novel

Chelsea G.
Summers

TENDER IS

"This book will pull you in, take hold, and not let go until you reach the final page. Without a doubt, my favorite

TENDER IS THE FLESH

page. Without a doubt, my favorite
read of this year."
—CHRISTINA DALCHER, author of *Vox*



A course on cannibalism in contemporary fiction would include "Lapvona," "A Certain Hunger" and "Tender Is the Flesh." From left; Penguin Press, Unnamed Press, Scribner

"Lapvona," by Ms. Moshfegh, is also not overtly cannibalistic; unlike "A Certain Hunger," there's no braising with bouquet garni. But one scene involving a toenail is harrowing.

Known for her unsettling, delving-into-the-darkness stories including "Eileen" and "My Year of Rest and Relaxation," Ms. Moshfegh, 41, who lives in Los Angeles, wrote "Lapvona" during the spring of 2020, in the early days of the pandemic. "I wrote it in such complete isolation that I felt this incredible freedom to go wherever I was being led," she said.

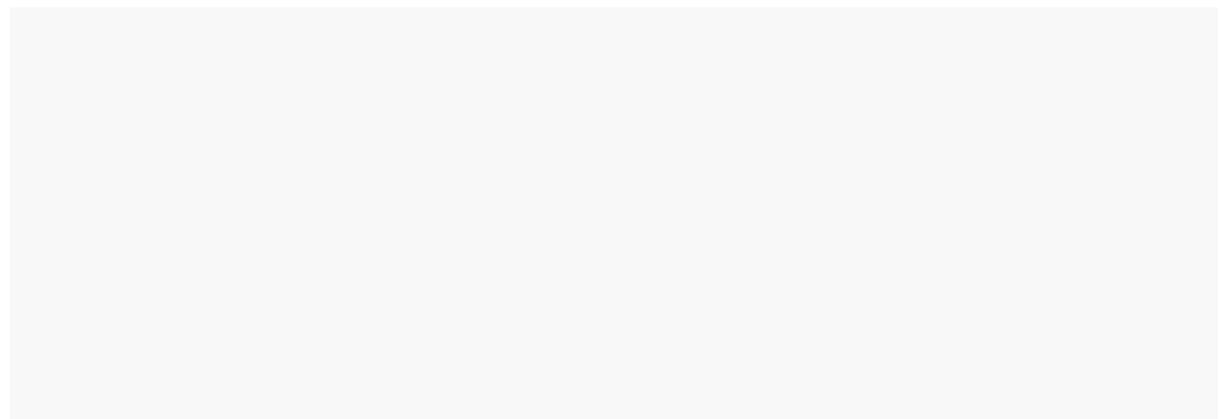
The character who eats another human, the greatest sin in his religiously vegetarian village, does so in an act of “depraved desperation,” said Ms. Moshfegh, a vegetarian herself.

Tales as Old as Time

Bill Schutt, the author of “[Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History](#),” says that fictional plots about eating human flesh are as old as literature itself.

Pointing to examples that include the man-eating Cyclops in Homer’s “Odyssey,” he said the taboo has artistically been used to horrify for centuries.

“When you take something that is so horrible and put it through this lens of fictionalization,” he said, “we get charged up about it, but we know we’re safe.” At least most of the time: Mr. Schutt only made it halfway through Hulu’s “Fresh” before he had to stop the movie. “It was almost too well done,” he said.



In “Fresh,” a woman becomes charmed by a man she meets at a grocery store, whom she later discovers is involved in an underground human flesh trade. Hulu

But as his book documents, cannibalism has occurred around the world throughout history, lending these fictional tales a queasy whiff of “*what if?*”

Historical examples in the book include “mumia,” a practice of using ground-up mummified bones to soothe various ailments that was popular in 17th-century Western Europe; the infamous [Donner Party pioneers](#) who became trapped in the Sierra Nevada in 1846; ritual cannibalism that took place in [Papua New Guinea until the 1950s](#); and famine-induced cannibalism in [China in the 1960s](#).

Mr. Schutt's book also features the story of the so-called Cannibal Cop, a former New York Police Department officer who was arrested in 2013 for participating in fetish forums that fantasized about cannibalizing women, and later acquitted. The New York Post [has published more than 30 articles](#) about the case, including [one suggesting the Halloween costume](#) of a policeman's uniform with a severed hand on a plate.

Flavors of that saga can be found in the more recent [accusations of sexual and physical abuse against](#) the actor Armie Hammer, which have included that he allegedly sent cannibalistic messages to a romantic partner. Mr. Hammer has denied the accusations and, through his lawyer, declined to comment for this article.

After the allegations became public, he was dropped by his agency, checked into rehab and is now, [Variety reports](#), selling time shares in the Cayman Islands. Coincidentally, Mr. Hammer worked with Mr. Chalamet and Mr. Guadagnino on "Call Me by Your Name."

'The Unthinkable'

As to what may be fueling the desire for cannibalism stories today, Ms. Lyle, the "Yellowjackets" co-creator, said, "I think that we're obviously in a very strange moment." She listed the pandemic, climate change, school shootings and years of political cacophony as possible factors.

"I feel like the unthinkable has become the thinkable," Ms. Lyle said, "and cannibalism is very much squarely in that category of the unthinkable."

According to Ms. Summers, cannibalism is always symbolic. For her novel's protagonist, eating human flesh can be seen as a way of holding on to a relationship that ended. For Ms. Summers herself, the plot of "A Certain Hunger" can't be uncoupled "from my own personal experiences with disordered eating, with the tamping down of feminine appetites, the way the media chews up and spits out writers, bougie consumption — and bougie lady consumption," she said.

More generally, Ms. Summers thinks that the recent spate of cannibalistic plots could also be commentaries on capitalism. "Cannibalism is about consumption and it's about burning up from the inside in order to exist," she said. "Burnout is essentially over-consuming yourself, your own energy, your own will to survive, your sleep schedule, your eating schedule, your body."

Ms. Moshfegh said her theory was "that it might be an antidote to the actual horror of what's happening to the planet." Like Ms. Summers, Ms. Moshfegh at times couldn't stomach her own work, describing the process of writing about cannibalism in "Lapvona" as "a bit disturbing."

"I had to think about what part of the body would be an interesting place to start," she said, "and how it would feel to hold someone's severed hand in yours."

The prop team on "Yellowjackets" had a similarly unnerving task in determining what to use as faux human flesh in the show's pilot episode.

Should it be the lab-grown human steak made from stem cells that [spurred outrage at a London museum](#)? The animal-free chicken, beef, salmon and dairy substitutes that some companies are creating using [similar technology](#)?

Ultimately, the prop team went with venison.

But they'll have to find an alternative for future episodes, Ms. Lyle and Mr. Nickerson said, because many in its cast are vegan.

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