THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

'Hallucinatory, divine, beyond belief'
DAISY JOHNSON

'I could not stop reading'
NAOMI ALDERMAN

THE VASTER WILDS

'Utterly mesmerising'
ANDREA WULF

'A worker of wonders'
DAISY JOHNSON



LAUREN GROFF

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THE VASTER WILDS

'[Groff] has a nose for moments of transcendent, almost holy natural beauty.'
The Times

'Lauren Groff is one of the finest novelists of our age. Her writing is searingly beautiful – delicate and powerful at the same time. The voice of the unnamed girl is haunting and the descriptions of the wild lands are deliciously poetic. *The Vaster Wilds* first grabs you tenderly and then refuses to let go. It's exquisite, heart-wrenching and utterly mesmerising.'
Andrea Wulf

'Groff writes in prose that sparkles . . . this beautifully written, soulful book is partly a fable and partly a treatise on greed: an exhortation for mankind to be satisfied with his lot, something we would all do well to heed.'
Spectator

'Of the many distinctions of this rich and visionary novel, perhaps the greatest is its prose. *The Vaster Wilds* presents us with a powerful alternative vision of the settlement of America: one not of a struggle between civilisation and savagery, in which European men felt "a need to set their boots upon everything they saw", but of a resourceful young woman working with nature to establish a new life.'
Financial Times

'Groff's prose is anointed with an agitated, near transcendent intensity . . . Groff's books make her one of an exciting new generation of American novelists who are using fiction to rewrite the founding myths of the so-called Land of Liberty.'
Sunday Telegraph

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‘Her storytelling has such raw virtuosity that the book is hard to put down. A page-turner which should appeal to Bear Grylls fans and feminists alike.’
Mail on Sunday

‘Between these memories, scenes mostly consist of the girl’s triumphs and misfortunes as she traverses the land. These make for gripping reading, the life-or-death implications made clear, even when the setback is as small as a mislaid pair of gloves. It is here that Groff’s spellbinding prose comes fully into play, as she describes the glory of the natural world, even in moments when it is at its most unforgiving.’
iNews

‘It’s a novel of bleakness and beauty, as the relentless demands of eking out a life wreck her “good strong dancing body”, while the wonders of nature leave her spirit “ravished”.’
Daily Mail

‘There is something exhilarating about this novel, a velocity of ambition . . . Groff is not lost in the forest. She knows exactly where she is going.’
Guardian

‘I could not stop reading. It is haunting, thrilling, gripping and rich. An unputdownable adventure, a mystery and a strange, beautiful redemption.’
Naomi Alderman

‘Groff is a mastermind, a masterpiece creator, an intoxicating magician. I wait with impatience for every book and I am always surprised and delighted. *The Vaster Wilds* feels like her bravest yet, hallucinatory, divine, beyond belief but also entirely human.’
Daisy Johnson

‘Written in Groff’s trademark visceral prose, this haunting book will stay with you long after you’ve finished it.’
Glamour

‘As always, Groff’s prose is finely worked, with a poet’s eye for imagery (a porcupine walks “his bristles through the undergrowth with the weary pomp of a crowned prince”) and a visionary quality that recalls *Matrix*.’
Observer

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About the Author

Lauren Groff is a three-time National Book Award finalist and the *New York Times* bestselling author of four novels, *The Monsters of Templeton*, *Arcadia*, *Fates and Furies* and *Matrix*, and two short story collections, *Delicate Edible Birds* and *Florida*. She has won The Story Prize and been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her work regularly appears in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic* and elsewhere, and she was named one of *Granta's* 2017 Best Young American Novelists.

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Also by Lauren Groff

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For my sister, Sarah

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THE VASTER WILDS

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I.

The moon hid itself behind the clouds. The wind spat an icy snow at angles.

In the tall black wall of the palisade, through a slit too seeming thin for human passage, the girl climbed into the great and terrible wilderness.

Over her face she wore a hood drawn low, and she was slight, both bony and childish small, but the famine had stripped her down yet starker, to root and string and fiber and sinew. Even so starved, and blinded by the dark, she was quick. She scrabbled upright, stumbled with her first step, nearly fell, but caught herself and began to run, going fast over the frozen ruts of the field and all the stalks of dead corn that had come up in the summer already sooty and fruitless and stunted with blight.

Swifter, girl, she told herself, and in their fear and anguish, her legs moved yet faster.

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These good boots the girl had stolen off the son of a gentleman, a stripling half her age but of equal size, who had died of the smallpox the night before, the rash a rust spreading over the starved bones. These leather gloves and the thick cloak the girl had stolen off her own mistress. She banished the thought of the woman still weeping upon her knees on the frozen ground in the courtyard inside that hellish place. With each step she drew away, everything there loosened its grip on the girl.

Yet there was a strange gleam upon the dark ground of the field ahead, and as she moved, she saw it was the undershirt of the soldier who a fortnight earlier had been caught worming his body slow from the horrors of the fort and toward the different horrors of the forest. He had made it halfway to the trees when in silence a shadow that had lain upon the ground grew denser, grew upward, came clear at last as the fearsomest of the men of this country, the warrior two heads taller than the men of the fort, who made himself yet more terrible by wearing upon his shoulders outstretched a broad dark mantle of turkey feathers. He had lifted with one hand the creeping fearful soldier by his hair and had with a knife cut a long wet red mouth into the man's throat. Then he dropped him to spill his heart's blood into the frozen earth and there the dead man lay splayed ignoble. All this time, he had lain unburied, for the soldiers of the settlement had become too weak and too cowardly in their hunger to fetch the body back.

She had passed the dead man and his reek had drawn itself out of her

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nostrils and she was nearly to the woods when she stumbled again, for the thought of these two men gave rise to thoughts of other men who lurked perhaps in the woods, men out there hidden and awaiting her. And now, as she peered before her into the dark of the forest, she saw a man crouching in ambush in ever deeper blacker shadow of each tree, perhaps a man with a knife or an ax or an arrow and cold murder in his eye.

She stopped her running for a breath, but she had no choice, she took her courage up again and she ran on.

And as she ran each imagined man in passing revealed himself to be mere shadow again.

She had chosen to flee, and in so choosing, she had left behind her everything she had, her roof, her home, her country, her language, the only family she had ever known, the child Bess, who had been born into her care when she was herself a small child of four years or so, her innocence, her understanding of who she was, her dreams of who she might one day be if only she could survive this starving time.

Think not of it, girl, she told herself, think not of it, else you shall die of grief.

And she did not turn back to look upon the gleam of the fort's fires as they painted the night sky above in red. She was unlettered but was deep devout, a good and a pious girl, and she had listened when the ministers read from the holy book, she had tracked their words and taken them whole in long phrases into her knowledge. She had learned the lesson of only forward movement from the wife of Lot, who had glanced backward once as she was fleeing the destruction of sodom

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and by her weakness and the wrath of god had been transformed to a pillar of salt.

Only when she was inside the forest did the wind remove its hands from her cheeks and from under her skirts. It was warmer among the trees but by no means warm. She stopped and pressed her forehead to the rough bark of a pine and the harshness of it on her skin held her there. What light that could have fallen from the sky did not fall at all, as the heavens above were covered by a thickness of cloud. The forest before her was as dense as pitch, though pocks of snow did gleam in the pits of the trees. Her breath was ragged and with effort she quieted it. She let the silence seep back into her, into the forest, and it smoothed over the memory of her crashing footsteps, and she wondered if she had been loud enough to have waked the men of the fort or the original men of this forest. The men known, the men unknown. Either could be creeping near to her even now.

She listened over the scrape and bow of the wind, cold trunk rubbing trunk in a tuning of fiddles, but she heard no footsteps and no breaking twigs. Though the lack of sound was no real solace.

At last, when her blood calmed in her ears, she heard the stream not far from her, the water rasping under its shell of ice. She pressed forward as fleet and soft as she could, and when under her foot she discovered the slickness of the ice, then the narrow aisle of stony bank where the stream ran swollen in the spring, she followed it northward, grateful to escape the sharp grasping twigs and bushes that snatched at her face and her clothing.

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Into the night the girl ran and ran, and the cold and the dark and the wilderness and her fear and the depth of her losses, all things together, dwindled the self she had once known down to nothing.

A nothing is no thing, a nothing is a thing with no past.

It was also true that with no past, the girl thought, a nothing could be free.

In time, her mind that had been shocked in flight began to move into thinking again.

She became aware of eyes upon her.

And though she imagined that they were the hostile eyes of men, they were in fact the eyes of the forest itself watching this new form of creature with its wheezing breath and crashing footfall and bitter human reek, all the night birds and the roaming creatures stilled in silent wonderment as the girl went past. And even when the creatures could no longer see or hear the running girl and the last scent of her distress faded in their immediacy from the noses of the crawling beasts, when only a trace of her could be scented upon the leaves and dirt and snow displaced by her feet, the forest's sense of time shuddered and jerked forward, and the rip that the running girl made became healed, and the ordinary business of the creatures' hungers was reawakened behind her. Only hours after she had passed through the forest, she became to them a strange dream barely remembered in the urgencies of the moment.

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It was perhaps minutes, perhaps hours, there was no way to tell, but a long thick expanse of time spent running northward up the stream bank, when the girl saw a deeper darker shine near where her boot fell, a softness of the ice beneath, and she knew it to be water freed from its frozen crust, openly flowing. She bent and took off her leather gloves with her teeth and pressed her unworking hands between her legs until they had thawed enough to bend, then she opened the sack that she had been carrying in one stiff fist, reached in and took the pewter cup she had stolen, dipped it into the running water, and drank deep. The cold sliced down the center of her like the tip of a knife. It made her ache. Her teeth chattered in the bones of her skull. Her stomach, which had been empty these four days, protested at its new fullness of water. She replaced the cup and tied the sack to her waist, lifting her cloak and gowns to put it against her skin so she could feel it on the flesh of her body and would be comforted by having it always near. She wanted to sink down into the small heap of snow to sleep, her head swam and pounded, but she could not do this she knew, and she pressed herself on again, forward, away, farther.

And as she ran she prayed in her soul: O god, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up for the godly, grant me in all my doubts and uncertainties the grace to ask what thou wouldst have me do that the spirit of wisdom may save me from all false choices and that in thy light I may see light and in thy straight path may not stumble.

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She listened for anything, for the low moan of a night bird as emissary of the divine, a shifting quality of wind that would speak its will to her, but in response there were only the noises of her passage and the cold wind playing against the disinterested forest.

And thus she ran again, and while running as soft as she could, she remembered the solace of song and thought perhaps it could heat the edges of her fear until it melted within her.

So only inside herself she sang as brightly as she knew how, the spring clad all in gladness doth laugh at winter's sadness fa la la la la la la la la la and so on.

She knew many songs, of course, but this was the only one that came forth to meet her, quite a strange absence of song there was inside her mind, as once a lifetime ago she had been a dancing quipping singing little fool and hundreds of songs she had known. But she knew that a fool could only exist where there was indulgence and freedom enough for laughter and so it was natural that in flight all of her other songs had dissolved. Still, this one song gave what comfort it could, though in such exigency such comfort was small.

The moon had begun to show its face and the woods were bands of light and dark with snow passing in its streaks beneath.

Something tore in the skies above and the new downsifting snow was no longer needles of ice as it had been when she had first escaped the fort but had become now soft slow flakes that began to collect upon the old surface of snow and to obscure the steps she had made behind her.

Thank you good snow for your aid, the girl thought.

Press on, girl, the snow said, in falling.

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It was not long afterward that the voices descended to her from the sky.

At first, she could not distinguish what they said, but soon they spoke to her louder and slid into the mistress's tones, scolding. Wicked sprite, verminous bit of stuff, thou last least unlettered Zed, who fled thy duty in thy mistress's worst need. For it is said thou must submit thyself unto the elder, yea all be subject one to another and be clothed with humility, for god resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble.

So the voice of the mistress hissed to her out of the dark forest.

And forgetting herself the girl said aloud into the falling snow, Ah but does the good book not say also to escape to the mountains lest ye be consumed?

And she laughed because she knew it did say this and that she had won the point.

But the forest grew wary at the laugh, this new noise made within its sleeping stillness, and the girl had to slap her own cheek to hush herself and goad her body forward.

The mistress's voice fell itself a flake and the girl in her running left it behind her.

Now the moon came full out from its cloudy coverlet and the night grew old. The girl was so weary, so weary. She was running on little anymore but the air in her lungs and the forward thrust of her terror. Her breath was visible in white plumes that floated off upward behind her.

And a new voice said in her ear, Why, girl, do you bend your feet to the north?

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I run toward living, I run toward the living, the girl told this new voice. Away from a certain wretched death, away from the devil that prowls invisible in the settlement. Toward what I once peeped over the governor's shoulder, a parchment, a map, a fat bay drawn to the east and a ladder of rivers like the sun's rays that climbed ever northward out of it. He was stabbing the drawing with his fat finger, the governor, saying to the man beside him that up here at the top of the lands drawn, in the north, there were the settlements of frenchmen, canada, and in the south here there were settlements of spanishmen, la florida. And in gathering quick-quick the stuff in the sack just before my flight, I did bethink to myself that though both frenchmen and spanishmen are foul papists of course, they are still the men of a similar god, of the same holiest of books. And that because it seemed equal distance north and south to the settlements, I must choose the frenchmen, for I do not speak a whit of the spanish language, but of the french I have had a small taste and can make myself understood.

And yet you do not know the scale of this place? the voice said, and it was now scornful.

And the girl said, No, but surely it must be smaller than my own far greater country across the waters, where each field is so thick with legend and myth and ancient battles that one step is not merely in space, unlike in this new world, but also through layers of time. Here there is nothing, only land, all the earth and mountains and trees remain innocent of story. This place is itself a sheet of parchment yet to be written upon.

And what, the voice said, should you even survive the journey, would you expect such foul papists to do to a young girl like you, to a young body like your own young female person?

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O do not bend my thoughts to such evil end, she said sternly.

But the voice persisted, And you who had only ever known comfort and company, who had slept all your life beside other warm bodies, you who have sought out other humans even if you were a single moment alone, for solitude was unbearable to you, are you so ready to be utterly without friend in these echoing wastes?

And she wanted to weep but she did not and instead she said, But I am not alone for I carry my god in my heart always.

And she did, she felt god, a pinprick of light deep within her.

But the voice said, And what if the lasting peril is not man at all but god's own wilderness, the dangerous landscape, the beasts that roam and prey in this place?

And now she thought for the first time of the deathly cold of these days at the end of winter, then of the wolves and the mountain lions and the serpents that made a home in this wild uncivilized land.

And these were but the known perils, but she thought there must also be perils unknown. Monsters uncharted to the imagination of man, difficulties impossible to return from.

When she was quite small and the mistress's son Kit was not bent on the torment of her, the few times he had softened somewhat and took her upon his knee and showed her the terrible things in his books, she had seen a picture of a headless man with eyes set deep within his shoulders and a mouth under his ribs. A man with the head of a dog. And Kit would also tell her astonishing things, things educated boys knew, for instance of the lemures, who were shades of the malignant dead, and the places in the ocean where sailors were on one side sucked down into a chewing maw or on the other plucked from the ship by an enormous

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beast and gobbled. Riddling women with bodies of lions. The spiteful fairies of the woods who stole children to raise them in the lands under the hills and left squeaking babies made of clay in their place. And what was not writ in a book or told to her by Kit, her own quick and teeming mind could create, for instance a woman with the teeth of a viper or a black mist of poison sleeking low in wait.

She knew that surely such monsters could thrive in a place so vast and varied as this place was.

And of course even the most redoubtable of the men of the fort were terrified of the worst terrors that the forest held, not the bears or monsters, but the intelligent man who hated and would slyly murder them.

Then again she had lived among the men of the fort long enough to understand that even among her own, too, there were bad men, for there had been gentlemen the girls all whispered to stay away from and soldiers with a red gleam of the devil to them and mercenaries who killed as easy as sleeping, and it would be one of these who would be sent after her, for she knew that at least one bad man would be sent after her, for what she had done could not be permitted to stand.

She shuddered and had to put from her thought the tortures this bad man would do unto her if indeed she were caught.

For even a good man was more deadly than the worst of bears, and she had seen what even a blind ancient bear with its teeth pulled out of its black gums and its claws cut off and its eyes blinded in pink cross-hatching could do. In the gardens upon the south bank, in the summer heat, she stood among the watching people in their finery, in their sickness of excitement; and her eyes could not be drawn away from where in the ring the heavy stinking slavering miserable bear had been tied to

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the stake. Yet when the ferocious dogs were loosed to tear at the matty miserable beast, the bear did calmly throw them, one two three, until all three dogs were broken and whimpering and the curs pulled themselves off with their front legs to discover some place to die in peace alone. And all around, the people jeered at the beasts both victorious and slain. But the girl had walked home carrying an ice of horror in her entrails, and that night the poor old bear entered into the worst of her nightmares, showing its gums with the abscesses of green pus until she sickened woke to the churchbells of morning. And this famous fighting bear was merely a city bear, unused to the thicker older forests of this new wild place, he was a bear that had been tamed. A wild bear would be many times more vicious and brutal than what she had known, like everything from this benighted land. It would be unthinkable in its scale and ferocity. And men would be worse.

Her body was staggering now, her breath rasped in the cold air.

She must have come leagues from the fort, she told herself, and she dared to look behind her now toward where the fort would have been. But she could find no traces of its light upon the sky, no sign that her people had come to this place at all. And this was good.

The voice came back once more to say calmly, Once a fool, ever a fool.

Silence, she cried out to the voice inside her mind. And the voice obeyed and made itself silent. And she was left all alone in the terrible darkness again.

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2.

She kept running, though too tired, she ran until the light of the moon waned and her body in its many hours of running had settled into a hot exhilaration.

All at once, she breathed the cold with gladness, and her legs felt light and free. Her skin prickled full of fire.

And when this joy of running arose in her, there also arose small visions that passed before her eyes.

There, within the shape of an elm uprooted by some distant windstorm, its gnarled roots dark against the night, she saw rearing a stallion black and shining.

But no, girl, she told herself, there are no stallions in this new world, for the only horses to be found in this place had been brought upon the ships, and they had been eaten long ago in the deepening hungers of the famine.

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Later, from the top of a rise, she saw in the dim and silvery light the wind lifting lighter snow and sculpting it into a shining city with rooftops and chimneys and a steeple and even the smoke of fires merrily ascending from the chimneys toward heaven, and it gladdened her heart so well that she cried out aloud. Then the wind shifted and dashed the fairy city into the ground.

And, in devastation, she ran on.

At last, the stream that she had been following grew wide and the trees in the dimness split open to show a space of vast cold dying moonlight ahead. And there it was, the river, iced in its greenish white, and beneath the surface lay deep and angry waters that churned ever outward, first toward the bay then out into the larger colder wilder oceans.

And this river was so far from where she had begun her flight that it was unlikely, she decided, that even so bloodthirsty a man as any who would be sent after her from the fort would make it to this place before giving up and creeping defeated home. For all the souls who had come over to this country were now at the end of this winter of horror starved, and many of the very stoutest had hungered and shat and coughed themselves into the final kingdom of death, and even the most vicious of the men who had come across the ocean had weakened and become strangely indolent, lying on their cots all day and staring blankly at the gray and ice-pissing ice-shitting skies.

At the border of the river, she discovered a crevice within the boulders that was barely larger than her own body, and she moved swiftly to make it a hovel of her own, for the first new light of the day was

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now growing in the east and she would be soon plain visible to anyone about.

Down in the cleft, away from the blow of wind, she warmed her hands again under her skirts in the hot split of her thighs. When her fingers could move, she untied the sack and set out her few precious things: the two brown coverlets that, though crawling with lice, were thick and warm, then the biting hatchet, then the knife, then the pewter cup so palely glowing, then the flint.

These were all the goods she had thought to bring with her in the moment of rupture. She would have brought food, but there had been no food to steal for many days.

When she had warmed herself enough in the cleft out of the hard wind, she ran to a pine tree with dead boughs and snapped them off and dragged them back over the rocks and stepped upon them until they were small enough to bring down into the hole with her. She took a handful of dry brown needles from their cling on the smallest twigs. She crouched in the hole and struck and struck and struck at the flint with the knife's hilt, but no spark leapt up. She struck yet more until her hands were numb and her face was wetted with tears in her despair.

Spark, fall upon this leaf and become flame, she whispered.

Almighty father, thy servant begs for help.

But for a long while, the spark was deaf to her pleas, and she had to warm her hands between her legs twice more to make them able to move again.

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Finally, though, a spark fell and she cradled it with dry needles and dead leaves and breathed upon it, and the spark was shy, it nearly flicked itself dead again, but she prayed and blew again, and it grew, it was hungry, it ate a small bite of the dead leaf and found that it wanted more, it licked up and became flickering joyous flame. She fed it until it became a small and hot fire that she was so grateful for and so delighted in its warmth that she had the longing to put it in her own mouth to eat it up.

The flame danced prettily, moving its pert little head all around like a living creature. When she was sure it was strong enough that it would not be extinguished, she spat into it for good luck.

Now, over the top of her hovel, she spread one of her woolen coverlets to make a flat tent, and she wrapped the other coverlet around her body, and in the new warmth of the fire, in the tent's darkness, the stones all around her took on warmth. What flakes of snow could land upon the hot stones near the fire hissed out. Her body, breath by breath, released its tautness. She felt strange and soon realized that the strangeness came from not shivering for the first time she could remember in many months. Her run over these miles in the night and this new fire had warmed her enough to calm the unwilled shuddering of her body. For, within the misery of the fort, all the firewood had run out over the long course of the siege, and what wood that could be spared of the torn-down houses was meant to warm the gentlefolk first, and she, being a mere servant, though once the pet of the liberal and artistic household, had been abandoned among the lesser folk to the sharp and gnawing teeth of the cold. She could only creep by night, made icicle in

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