



## Trading Dreams at Midnight

By Diane McKinney-Whetstone  
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### Introduction

Fifteen-year-old Neena and her younger sister, Tish, are certain their mother will return, flush with the promise of a new man. But Freeda's disappearance on the cold February morning in 1984 soon stretches from days to months and from months to years. Raised by their stern grandmother Nan, the two sisters quickly learn to look after themselves.

Two decades later, Neena has moved away from Philadelphia and supports herself by blackmailing married men. When one of her stings goes terribly wrong, she returns to her childhood home. Unable to face her grandmother, Neena attempts to hustle a prominent local lawyer. But when she learns that Tish has been hospitalized with pregnancy complications, she must come to terms with the woman who raised her. Reunited, Neena, Tish, and Nan confront their memories of the past and their dreams for the future.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How does Neena's behavior toward the heater repairman suggest her approach to solving problems as an adult? What role does her mother's abandonment play in this behavior?
2. How would you distinguish between Neena and Tish in terms of their feelings toward their mother and their feelings toward their grandmother, Nan?
3. Throughout Nan, Freeda, Neena, and Tish's lives, a series of "angels" help them through the rough patches. How do Goldie, Sam, Bow Peep, and Mr. and Mrs. Cook function in this manner? To what extent do they remind you of figures in your life who have rescued you when you most needed it?
4. How does Freeda's early behavior as a child hint at some of the mental illness and madness that follow?
5. To what extent is Nan's infatuation with and marriage to Alfred consistent with her character? What accounts for her unflinching devotion to him?
6. Why does Nan conceal the fact of Freeda's death from Neena and Tish? In what ways is Freeda's absence potentially more powerful than her presence?
7. Why is Cliff willing to get to know Neena, despite the risk of damage to his marriage and his career? What does this willingness suggest about his character?
8. How does Malik's willingness to conspire with Nan in keeping the news of Neena's return from Tish reflect his commitment to his wife's and unborn child's health?
9. How does Neena's treatment of Cliff suggest that she may have genuine feelings for him?
10. How does the author's decision to leave Neena and Tish's reunion until the very end of the novel deepen your appreciation of their sibling relationship?

### About the Author

The author of the critically acclaimed novels *Tumbling*, *Tempest Rising*, *Blues Dancing*, and *Leaving Cecil Street*, Diane McKinney-Whetstone is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Black Caucus of the American Library Association's Literary Award for Fiction. She teaches fiction writing at the University of Pennsylvania and lives with her husband, Greg, in Philadelphia.