

Reading Guide

The Lost Girls

William Morrow Paperbacks

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Introduction

In 1935, six-year-old Emily Evans vanishes from her family's vacation home on a remote Minnesota lake. Her disappearance destroys the family—her father commits suicide, and her mother and two older sisters spend the rest of their lives at the lake house, keeping a decades-long vigil for the lost child.

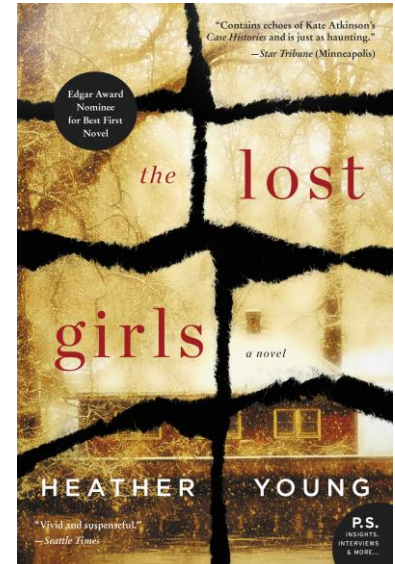
Sixty years later, Lucy, the quiet and watchful middle sister, lives in the lake house alone. Before her death, she writes the story of that devastating summer in a notebook that she leaves, along with the house, to the only person who might care: her grandniece, Justine. For Justine, the lake house offers freedom and stability—a way to escape her manipulative boyfriend and give her daughters the home she never had. But the long Minnesota winter is just beginning. The house is cold and dilapidated. The dark, silent lake is isolated and eerie. Her only neighbor is a strange old man who seems to know more about the summer of 1935 than he's telling.

Soon Justine's troubled oldest daughter becomes obsessed with Emily's disappearance, her mother arrives to steal her inheritance, and the man she left launches a dangerous plan to get her back. In a house haunted by the sorrows of the women who came before her, Justine must overcome their tragic legacy if she hopes to save herself and her children.

Questions for Discussion

1. Loyalty—especially the loyalty of siblings—is a prominent theme in *The Lost Girls*, and it determines the course of many of the characters' lives. Discuss the conflicting loyalties Lucy believes she owes Lilith and Emily. Did her loyalties change during the course of the summer of 1935? How and why? Did they change again as she wrote her journal? How about the loyalty that binds Matthew and Abe? How did it affect their choices, and, indirectly, the lives of Lucy and Lilith?

2. The author evokes an extremely strong sense of place, both in northern Minnesota and in the lake house itself. How does this sense of place shape the narrative? How does it echo the internal conflicts of the characters? How are Lucy's and Justine's stories colored by the seasons (summer versus winter) in which they are told? For what might the lake serve as a metaphor in the story?



3. How does the author use tone and language to differentiate the dual narrative voices in the novel? Which voice did you connect to most?

4. Justine's own daughter is entering adolescence at a time when she is reading about the adolescent trials of Lilith and Lucy. How does the teenage experience change over time, and what remains the same?

5. Who are the "lost girls" of the novel's title? In what ways are each of them lost? Are any of the lost girls "found" in the end? How?

6. Why do you think Melanie is so haunted by the story of what happened to Emily? How does Melanie see herself in relation to her? As her mirror image, as the keeper of her memory, or as something else? Why do you think Melanie decided to keep Lucy's journal for so long? Do you think Emily's story will continue to have such power over her after the events of the novel?

7. Another theme in the story is the meaning of salvation. Each character, at one point or another, faces the question of what salvation means to them, and each comes up with their own answer to that critical question. Discuss what salvation means to each character, and whether or not they were saved according to the measure they created.

8. Maurie believes her father is Charlie Pugh. Who do other characters, such as Abe, Matthew, Lilith, and Lucy, believe her father to be? What do you think Justine believes, after reading Lucy's journal? Why do you think the author never explicitly reveals his identity?

9. Patrick is a constant threat to Justine throughout the narrative, but do you think he is bad or violent at his core? Why or why not? Even if he is not, do you agree that Justine is better off alone? How does the importance of her independence resonate with the themes in the novel?

10. Discuss the role of men in the novel generally, as fathers, lovers, and friends. Do you think they had a more or less profound effect on Lucy, Lilith, and Justine than the women in their lives—the sisters, mothers, and daughters? Why or why not?