

Reading Guide

The Sea of Lost Girls

William Morrow

By Carol Goodman

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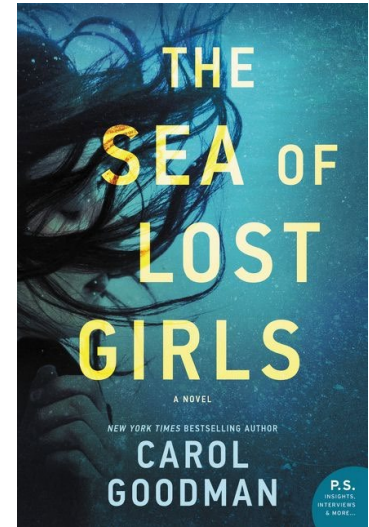
Introduction

In the tradition of Daphne du Maurier, Shari Lapena, and Michelle Richmond comes a new thriller from the bestselling author of *The Lake of Dead Languages*—a twisty, harrowing story set at a prestigious prep school in which one woman’s carefully hidden past might destroy her future.

Tess has worked hard to keep her past buried, where it belongs. Now she’s the wife to a respected professor at an elite boarding school, where she also teaches. Her seventeen-year-old son, Rudy, whose dark moods and complicated behavior she’s long worried about, seems to be thriving: he has a lead role in the school play and a smart and ambitious girlfriend. Tess tries not to think about the mistakes she made eighteen years ago, and mostly, she succeeds.

And then one more morning she gets a text at 2:50 AM: it’s Rudy, asking for help. When Tess picks him up she finds him drenched and shivering, with a dark stain on his sweatshirt. Four hours later, Tess gets a phone call from the Haywood school headmistress: Lila Zeller, Rudy’s girlfriend, has been found dead on the beach, not far from where Tess found Rudy just hours before.

As the investigation into Lila’s death escalates, Tess finds her family attacked on all sides. What first seemed like a tragic accidental death is turning into something far more sinister, and not only is Tess’s son a suspect but her husband is a person of interest too. But Lila’s death isn’t the first blemish on Haywood’s record, and the more Tess learns about Haywood’s fabled history, the more she realizes that not all skeletons will stay safely locked in the closet.



Questions for Discussion

1. What role does social media play in the novel? How different do you think the story would have been if it had taken place before the advent of the Internet and cell phones?
2. Do you think Tess is a good mother? Why or why not?
3. How does Goodman use isolation—both physical and mental—to build tension?
4. In the first chapter, Tess reflects that the life she has with Rudy is similar to the New England setting: “As with much of coastal Maine the land here is broken up by

waterways and pieced together by bridges and causeways like a tattered garment that's been darned." Do you think the metaphor is accurate? How does the setting mirror the other characters' lives?

5. In what ways are Tess and Lila foils for each other?
6. The Haywood students are putting on an "unorthodox" production of *The Crucible* in the novel. Why do you think Goodman chose this play? She also references *The Scarlet Letter* several times. How does the book emphasize the novel's themes?
7. How does Goodman subvert the story of the Ice Virgin?
8. Different missing girls are brought up in *The Sea of Lost Girls*, from Tess to Lila to Noreen to Paula Jean Welden. What effect does the layering of these stories have on the mystery? How do other themes echo?
9. How do power dynamics between the men and women in the story play out? How does shame affect the men and women differently in the novel? How does this relate to the dynamics of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements?
10. The local myth of the Maiden Stone looms large in the story. How does Luther's death challenge the myth? Have you heard legends local to you?
11. Why do you think Tess survived her time with Luther when so many of the other girls died during their own ordeals? Was it luck or something else?
12. What role does toxic masculinity play in the actions of Luther, Harmon, and Woody?
13. How does Goodman portray female relationships in the novel? What point do you think she is trying to make?
14. Tess is consistently accused of being a "stalker" and breaking Rudy's boundaries. Do you agree with this assessment? What boundaries are broken between other characters?
15. Toward the end of the novel, Rudy says, "People need to tell stories to make sense of all the crazy in the world." How do stories conflict with and reinforce the truth?
16. The line "Tragedy makes for odd bedfellows" is repeated several times. How does it apply to each of the characters?