

What Jonah Knew

Harper Paperbacks

By Barbara Graham

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Introduction

“A spellbinding literary thriller packed with psychological suspense and profound questions about motherhood, trauma and how death illuminates life.”—Amy Tan, bestselling author of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Where the Past Begins*

“Barbara Graham is a literary alchemist. *What Jonah Knew* not only grabs you from the first page, it makes the mystical believable and the human predicament shine with wit, wisdom, and love.”—Tara Brach, meditation teacher and bestselling author of *Radical Acceptance* and *Radical Compassion*

A seven-year-old boy inexplicably recalls the memories of a missing 22-year-old musician in this psychological thriller about the fierce love between mothers and sons across lifetimes, a work of gripping suspense with a supernatural twist that will mesmerize fans of Chloe Benjamin and Lisa Jewell.

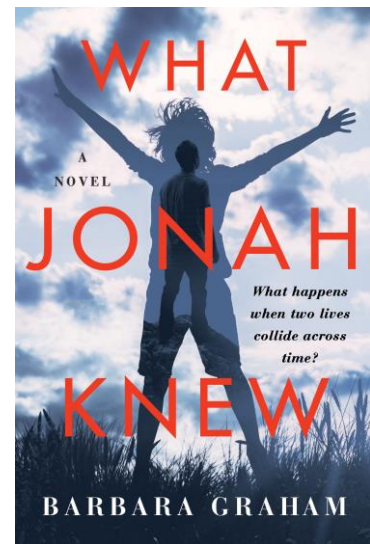
Helen Bird will stop at nothing to find Henry, her musician son who has mysteriously disappeared in upstate New York. Though the cops believe Henry’s absence is voluntary, Helen knows better.

While she searches for him—joined finally by police—Jonah is born to Lucie and Matt Pressman of Manhattan. Lucie does all she can to be the kind of loving, attentive mother she never had, but can’t stop Jonah’s night terrors or his obsession with the imaginary “other mom and dog” he insists are real.

Whether Jonah’s anxiety is caused by nature or nurture—or something else entirely—is the propulsive mystery at the heart of the novel.

All hell breaks loose when the Pressmans rent a summer cottage in Aurora Falls, where Helen lives. How does Jonah, at seven, know so much about Henry, Helen’s still-missing son? Is it just a bizarre coincidence? An expression of Jung’s collective unconscious? Or could Jonah be the reincarnation of Henry?

Faced with more questions than answers, Helen and Lucie set out to make sense of the insensible, a heart-stopping quest that forces them to redefine not just what it is to be a mother or a human being, but the very nature of life—and death—because of what Jonah knows.



Questions for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the novel’s title? How does what Jonah knows influence the main characters’ beliefs about life and death?

2. Helen and Lucie—both mothers—are deeply shaken by what happens to their sons and want more than anything to protect them and prevent them from suffering. What do they discover in the process of trying?
3. What are some of the limitations that all parents must contend with, no matter how much they love their children and try to keep them safe?
4. As a young mother Helen kept secrets to protect herself and her son. How has this affected her emotionally? Do you think she should have told Will the truth about her past after Henry disappeared? Does her relationship to keeping secrets change over the course of the novel? Are there ways in which family secrets have impacted your life?
5. Jonah shows signs of PTSD early in life, and Lucie believes this is due to trauma passed down from family members killed in the Holocaust. Did you accept this as the cause of Jonah's anxiety and night terrors? Have you ever felt echoes of ancestral trauma in your own life?
6. It's well known that a key to healing trauma is talking about it and being believed. How does not being believed affect Jonah? What does it take to make the adults in the novel finally accept what he's telling them? What role does Charlie play?
7. Most of us assume we're shaped by a combination of nature and nurture, yet when asked how acceptance of reincarnation would change the world, Dr. Ian Stevenson told the New York Times, "It would lessen the guilt on the part of parents. They wouldn't have as much of a burden that, whatever goes wrong with a child is all their fault, either through genes or mishandling during the child's infancy." When she reads this, Lucie feels great relief. What are your thoughts about Stevenson's statement? Have you—or anyone you know—ever sensed that you've lived before?
8. Of the main characters, Matt, a physician, is skeptical about reincarnation as the most plausible explanation for Jonah's distress. He also questions the credibility of Dr. Skinner's research. What, if anything, changes Matt's mind?
9. Helen and Lucie have one of the more complicated relationships in the book. How well do you think each woman handles her entanglement with the other? Do their feelings toward one another change by the end? If so, how? Can you imagine how you'd react if suddenly your child announced that he or she had another mom?
10. Rosaleen says, "Loss is the price we pay for love." How does this statement manifest in the lives of: Helen? Lucie? Jonah? Mira? Matt? Do any of the characters also make discoveries that help them move on with their lives? If so, what are some of those discoveries?
11. The book's epigraph by physicist Max Planck reads: "Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of the

mystery we are trying to solve.” Yet in the novel various views of the afterlife are espoused—from Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and research on kids who recall a previous life. What are the different perspectives and what’s your take on them? Even if it can never be proved, what do you think happens to us after we die? How, if at all, has the novel impacted your beliefs?