

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE

HEATHER GUDENKAUF

BEFORE SHE WAS FOUND



"Eerily page-turning and wonderfully twisty,
Before She Was Found is a riveting story."

—KIMBERLY McCREIGHT,

Discussion Guide

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. Cora, Violet and Jordyn are young girls with a turbulent friendship. Why do you think Cora keeps trying to remain friends with two people who don't seem to have her best interests in mind? What role do you think Cora plays in the friendship's difficulties?
2. Childhood friendships can leave deep impressions, both good and bad. What childhood friendship impacted your life the most? Why?
3. Parents sometimes go to extreme lengths to protect their children. To what extent would you go to safeguard someone you love? Where would you draw the line?
4. Social media has become an incredibly integral part of day-to-day life, even for children. What responsibility do social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat and others have in protecting youth? How about schools or government? And parents?
5. Several kinds of families are represented in the novel: Jordyn is being raised by her grandparents, Cora comes from a two-parent home and Violet is being raised by a single mother. How do you think the dynamics of each family played into the events of the novel?
6. Were there any points in the story where you thought you had solved the mystery? Which characters did you suspect more than others? Why do you think it was easy to suspect some people more than others even if they were innocent?
7. Who would you describe as the antagonist or antagonists in *Before She Was Found*? Why? Who should be held accountable? In what ways?
8. How did the involvement of children complicate the event and the investigation? At what point after a tragedy should a child be forced to answer important questions for an investigation?
9. How would *Before She Was Found* have been different if it had taken place in a different time or place?
10. What is the significance of the title? How does it relate to each of the main characters?
11. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be? Why?

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



What was the inspiration behind *Before She Was Found*?

Just like many of my novels, the idea for *Before She Was Found* was inspired by news headlines: a fictional online entity and real life collided with heartbreaking results. Not far from where I live, the account of two young girls who were obsessed with a character called Slender Man, who originated as an online meme, hit the news. Over the years, Slender Man, a tall, spidery figure with a blank face, has been the subject of short stories, videos, artwork and video games. The girls, believing Slender Man would hurt them and their families, lured a classmate into a wooded area and attacked her. The attack not only had a devastating impact on the victim and her family, but on the perpetrators, their families and the entire community.

The novel was also inspired by the many accounts of those who have misused social media by pretending to be someone else, bullying and encouraging others to hurt themselves. Through my writing I wanted to explore how social media, a lack of mental health services and family dynamics can impact actions and decisions that have life-altering costs to all involved.

Before She Was Found is written in several different voices and styles. What were some of the challenges you faced in writing this way, and how did you overcome them?

I love writing from multiple points of view and wrestling with the challenge of weaving different voices and writing styles together. It can be very difficult to balance the various perspectives throughout a novel and to know when a particular character needs to take center stage. As I wrote and got to know the characters, Cora's journals and online conversations with Joseph Wither emerged as the focal points of the novel.

Another challenge I faced was to make sure that I captured the voice of twelve-year-old Cora in her journals and other communications. As an adult, it can be easy to forget what it's like to be a preteen. To help with this, I thought back to my experiences as a classroom teacher and instructional coach. I also visited with younger family members for feedback so that as I wrote in Cora's voice, I could do it accurately and honestly.

The novel jumps back and forth in time, making it a challenge to keep the movements of the characters straight. To help, I created an extensive timeline that I taped to the wall so I could refer to it as I wrote, adding and moving events as the story evolved. I also created a handwritten map of Pitch, the fictional town where the story takes place, and had it right next to me as I worked so I could get the characters where they needed to be. Having these visuals were crucial for me as the story grew.

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



You are also a school curriculum coordinator and a mother. How do you think social media has changed the way young girls like Cora behave and interact with their peers?

The internet and social media have become so ingrained in our cultural fabric it sometimes feels like we've never been without it. Over the years, as an educator and as a mother, I've seen how social media often replaces face-to-face interactions between young people and their peers. As a result, I think some are emboldened by the immediacy and the impersonal nature of chatting via social media—I think misunderstandings and hurt feelings are compounded. Then there's the permanency of what is posted on social media—what is posted has a life beyond what many kids (and adults!) understand.

On the other hand, I've also seen some positive things associated with some of these platforms. Students today are using social media for social action and for discovering different perspectives and ideas. What's crucial is that children learn how to navigate and use social media judiciously and appropriately. Nothing can ever replace person-to-person interactions.

As an avid reader, what are some of the books and authors that have inspired your own writing?

I think everything I've read over the years has influenced and inspired my writing, but a few standouts come to mind.

I read *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson in high school and today it remains one of the most profound, emotional collections of short stories I've read to date. This haunting portrayal of small-town life taught me how much impact richly drawn characters have on a reader.

If I could choose a book to read again for the very first time, it would be Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. When you close a book and realize that you desperately miss the characters and can't stand not knowing what has become of them, you know it is a very special novel. Betty Smith had a way of writing and talking to the reader in such a way that I found myself saying, "Yes, that is exactly how it is!" There is such a truth to her stories, a turn of phrase that leaves you nodding your head.

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* was one of the first novels I remember reading that was written in multiple points of view. I was amazed at how brilliantly Kingsolver was able to tell such a complex, heart-wrenching tale through the eyes of the Price women. Though I didn't know it at the time I read *The Poisonwood Bible*, it set the stage for my exploration into writing many of my novels in multiple perspectives.

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is my favorite novel of all time. The story is of an immigrant named Antonia Shimerda (my maiden name is Schmida) and her family's new life in a small frontier town. I love how Cather was able to perfectly depict time and place through her stunning descriptions of the heartland. I think this is why I spend so much effort in developing a sense of setting in my own novels. I read *My Ántonia* every single year and have been collecting multiple editions over the years to add to my collection.

All of your books have been set in Iowa. What is it about this region that you feel makes it good fodder for storytelling?

A picturesque college town surrounded by craggy bluffs and thick woods, a renovated bookstore settled near the banks of the rushing Druid River, a close-knit farming community, a large Midwestern city, a remote cabin on Five Mines River. These are just a few of the Iowa-inspired settings in my novels. Fictional accounts? True! Fictional locations? Not quite.

I've lived in Iowa since I was a young child, and in each of my books I have included meaningful real-life locations into my fictional settings. From my first novel, *The Weight of Silence*, where the forest is based on my favorite hiking spot to my most recent novel, *Before She Was Found*, which borrows the feel of small rural railroad towns, I never tire of writing this beautiful, varied landscape.

It's not that Iowa and the Midwest make better settings than other regions, it's that Iowa is what I know, where I feel most comfortable, where I call home. Willa Cather, my favorite author, said it best: "Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet." I love this quote so much that I have it hanging near my desk as I write.