

Last Child Discussion Questions

by John Hart

Author Bio: (from his website, Wikipedia & Fantastic Fiction)

John Hart was born in Durham, North Carolina. He moved to Rowan County, where “The King of Lies” and “Down River” are both set, and on which the fictional Raven County is loosely based. A former defense attorney and stockbroker, John currently lives on a farm in Virginia, where he writes full-time.



Hart is the author of six New York Times bestsellers. He is the only author in history to win the best novel Edgar Award for consecutive novels. (He won for “Down River” and “The Last Child”.) He also won the Barry Award (2010) for “The Last Child”. His novels have been translated into thirty languages and can be found in over seventy countries.

Characters:

- **Johnny Merriman** – (13) – Boy whose twin sister, Alyssa, was kidnapped a year earlier. Lives with his mother, Katherine. Father, Spencer, left about a month after Alyssa went missing. Johnny is very independent and takes care of his clinically depressed, addicted mother. His best friend is Jack Hunt.
- **Detective Cross** – Jack’s father. Has been a police detective for 6 months.
- **Jack Cross** – (13) – Johnny’s best friend. Has a stunted arm due to a childhood accident. Father, is a police officer. Mother is very religious. Brother, Gerald, is a senior in high school and baseball star. Jack saw the vehicle that took Alyssa.
- **Levi Freemantle** – (43) – Escaped convict. Low level offender. Walked off a work crew. Has severe facial scarring from a fire. He also has mental issues and hears voices – especially the voice of God. Common-law wife is Rhonda Jefferies. (Rhonda is found murdered along with Clinton Rhodes.) Levi and Rhonda have a 2-year old daughter, Sofia.
- **Ken Holloway** – Rich man who owns the town mall and most of the town. He is Katherine Merriman’s lover. Has a very short temper and likes to use his fists when angry.
- **Clyde Lafayette Hunt** – (41) – Detective in charge of Alyssa Merriman kidnapping. Obsessed with the case and the remaining Merrimans. Has a son, Allen, who is a senior in high school. His wife left him and their son.
- **Burton Jarvis** – “Jar – (68) – Pedophile. Shot by Tiffany.
- **Meechum** – Head of security at the Mall.
- **Katherine Merriman** – (33) – Beautiful and ethereal woman. Johnny’s mother. Becomes clinically depressed after her daughter goes missing. Husband, Spencer, left after the kidnapping. Ken Holloway is her current lover.
- **“Uncle” Steve Merriman** – Johnny’s father’s cousin. Security guard at the mall.
- **Trenton Moore** – Medical examiner.

- **Tiffany Shore** – (12) – Girl abducted from school.
- **Officer Taylor** – Female police officer. Friend of Hunt's.
- **David Wilson** – Professor of Biology. Rock climber and general outdoorsman. Is riding a dirt bike and catapulted/forced off the bridge. Tells Johnny he found "the missing girl" before he dies.
- **John Yoakum** – (63) – Detective. Hunt's partner.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. What is the meaning of the title? Who is "The Last Child"?
3. What is the single most defining trait of Johnny Merrimon's character? What is his primary motivation? How does his antisocial (and sometimes illegal) behavior affect the novel and the people around him? Why might he be acting out?
4. How can you tell if a teenager is just being moody or if they are in actual danger/ emotional distress? What characteristics show that there is an actual problem with Johnny? Jack? Allen?
5. In the beginning of the novel we find Katherine in a state of utter collapse. Is her condition understandable, given the circumstances? If not, does she redeem herself?
6. Why doesn't Katherine Merriman leave Ken Holloway? What does he mean to her?
7. Do you believe Johnny's father is responsible for what happened to Alyssa because he forgot to pick her up? Why or why not?
8. We find out that Johnny has had a severe crisis of faith since Alyssa disappeared, and for what he was about to do, he "needed older gods." What draws Johnny to "older gods"? What kind of power do they have that the God of his childhood does not?
9. By the end of the novel, Johnny comes to believe that Freemantle was, indeed, set in motion as an instrument of God. If this the case, by what means did God put Freemantle in motion? And given the debt that Freemantle owes to Johnny's family, was the price too high, or was it fair? Is life, indeed, a circle?
10. Levi Freemantle is an escaped convict. How does his status as an ex-con affect the murder investigation?
11. Freemantle believes that crows have the power to collect the souls of the dead. This is why he fears them. If the crows are not after the soul of Freemantle's daughter, as Freemantle originally believes, why then are they following him? Do the crows have another goal in mind? Is the goal accomplished?
12. How do you explain Freemantle surviving his mortal injuries for as long as he did? Is it explainable?
13. Many people blame themselves for things that have happened in the past—Johnny, Hunt, Katherine, Jack, Levi Freemantle, and others. How does guilt motivate each of them to act? Where does the real guilt lie in the story?
14. Does Johnny's eventual surrender to Social Services seem like a good thing for him?

15. How might things have turned out differently for the Merrimon family if the father had been around?
16. The novel opens on a view of the North Carolina back country. What role does the setting have in the story? Do you think Johnny's story would have the same impact if it took place in a different state, or in a different country?
17. Why wasn't the initial accident reported? How many lives did hiding it cost? Was it worth it?
18. Is Jack Cross culpable for what happened? Gerald Cross? Detective Cross? Allen Hunt? What should happen to each of them?
19. Did you figure out who the killer was before it was revealed in the book? How did you know?
20. Were you satisfied with the ending of the story? If you could change it, what would you do to make it better?
21. Hart has written seven books. Will you read any of them?

References:

- Bookrags – <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-the-last-child/topicsfordiscussion.html#gsc.tab=0>
- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/h/john-hart/>
- John Hart website – <http://www.johnhartfiction.com/>
- Wikipedia – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hart_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hart_(author))

John Hart Books

Johnny Merrimon

1. The Last Child (2009)
2. The Hush (2018)

Stand Alone Novels

- The King of Lies (2006)
 - Down River (2007)
 - Iron House (2011)
- Redemption Road (2016)
- The Unwilling (2020)

If you liked Last Child, try...

- The Dry – Jane Harper
 - Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter – Tom Franklin
 - The Girl in the Red Coat – Kate Hamer
 - Those Who Wish Me Dead – Michael Koryta
 - Complusion – Keith Ablow
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