

# What the Dead Know Discussion Questions

by Laura Lippman

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## ***What the Dead Know***

Laura Lippman, 2007

HarperCollins

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## **Summary**

Thirty years ago two sisters disappeared from a shopping mall. Their bodies were never found and those familiar with the case have always been tortured by these questions: How do you kidnap two girls? Who—or what—could have lured the two sisters away from a busy mall on a Saturday afternoon without leaving behind a single clue or witness?

Now a clearly disoriented woman involved in a rush-hour hit-and-run claims to be the younger of the long-gone Bethany sisters. But her involuntary admission and subsequent attempt to stonewall investigators only deepens the mystery. Where has she been? Why has she waited so long to come forward? Could her abductor truly be a beloved Baltimore cop? There isn't a shred of evidence to support her story, and every lead she gives the police seems to be another dead end—a dying, incoherent man, a razed house, a missing grave, and a family that disintegrated long ago, torn apart not only by the crime but by the fissures the tragedy revealed in what appeared to be the perfect household.

In a story that moves back and forth across the decades, there is only one person who dares to be skeptical of a woman who wants to claim the identity of one Bethany sister without revealing the fate of the other. Will he be able to discover the truth? (*From the publisher.*)

## **Author Bio**

- Birth—January 31, 1959
- Where—Atlanta, Georgia, USA
- Raised—Baltimore, Maryland
- Education—B.S., Northwestern University
- Awards—Edgar and Shamus awards for *Charm City*, 1997; Agatha and Anthony awards for *Butchers Hill*, 1998; Anthony and Shamus awards for *Big Trouble*, 1999
- Currently—lives in Baltimore, Maryland

Lippman is a former reporter for the (now defunct) *San Antonio Light* and the *Baltimore Sun*. She is best known for writing a series of novels set in Baltimore and featuring Tess Monaghan, a reporter (like Lippman herself) turned private investigator. Lippman's works have won the Agatha, Anthony, Edgar, Nero, Gumshoe and Shamus awards. Her 2007 release, *What the Dead Know*, was the first of her books to make the *New York Times* bestseller list, and was shortlisted for the Crime Writer's Association Dagger Award.

## Principal characters:

- Heather Bethany – a forty-something woman
- Sunny Bethany – her older sister
- Kevin Infante – a Baltimore police officer
- Nancy Porter – Infante’s coworker
- Kay Sullivan – a social worker
- Gloria Bustamante – a high-powered defense attorney
- Chet Willoughby – the original police detective assigned to the Bethany sisters’ case
- Dave Bethany – the girls’ father
- Miriam Toles Bethany – the girls’ mother
- Sergeant Lenhardt – Infante’s superior
- Stan Dunham – a former Baltimore police officer and the girls’ alleged abductor
- Tony Dunham – Stan’s son
- Penelope Jackson – the owner of the car Heather was driving at the time of the accident.

## Discussion Questions

1. Laura Lippman withholds a lot of information in the early going of the book. Is that a cheat, or true to the way the characters would have approached the information?
2. Lippman actually used historically accurate details in the book—*Escape to Witch Mountain* and *Chinatown*, for example, were the films at that movie theater at that time, and the story about the freak blizzard in '66, the rise of the home answering machine in the 1980s. But do those details add something above and beyond historical accuracy?
3. Who in this book could be described as evil, if anyone? On the morning in March that all these people’s destinies collide and interlock—who’s really at fault, if anyone?
4. Is Miriam a "bad" woman? Does she see herself as bad and believe that she is being punished for her misdeeds? How does Lippman want us to regard Stan Dunham—as Miriam does, or as Sunny does, or somewhere in-between?
5. What is Kay’s role in the book? Is there any significance to the fact that she’s reading *Jane Eyre*?
6. Why are Dave and Miriam so restless in the days before their daughters disappear? What are they wistful for? What do they regret?
7. Dave and Miriam choose very different ways of mourning their daughters. Dave enshrines the memory, choosing to vary almost nothing about his life, while Miriam flees, ultimately choosing to live in a place where no one can possibly know about the tragedy. Is Lippman suggesting that one way of mourning is more valid than the other? Is Dave’s misery proof that he’s made a mistake, or simply evidence of his own conflicted nature?

8. The five-fold path, which Dave practices, includes self-knowledge as its ultimate goal. Who in *What the Dead Know* attains self-knowledge? Who never quite gets there? Does self-knowledge necessarily involve change, or can one find peace even in a flawed self?
9. At one point, Nancy Porter notes that "Heather Bethany's" story is least convincing when it's at its most lurid. The ultimate fate of the Bethany girls turns out to be almost banal, a series of mistakes and accidents that led to a tragedy no one planned. Is the fate of the Bethany girls more or less disturbing as a result? Does it seem like something that really could happen?
10. The last line of the first chapter dwells on how freeing it is to say one's name (p. 10). The last line of the book says one's name is the most important word that anyone can ever hear (p. 373). The missing Bethany girl has had a number of names throughout her life and even her mother, Miriam, has availed herself of a slight name change, reverting to her maiden name, which feels like a new name because it's pronounced differently in Spanish. Do names matter so much? Why? How do our names shape our destinies?
11. At the end of the book, Kevin Infante reflects that the missing Bethany girl has always been out in the open, the kind of woman that other people observe, but don't truly see—a student, a store clerk, a support person in the office. What is Lippman trying to say about certain women in our culture? Who is it that we don't see, who fails to register in our day-to-day lives?
12. The story of the missing Bethany sisters was inspired by a real incident that occurred in Washington, D.C. when the author was 16 years old. (Two sisters disappeared from a mall in 1975.) This was one of the first crimes to really impact the author. She says "We were raised to believe that we were safe going out in pairs, and the fact that two girls went out and never came home seemed particularly haunting." Do you have a crime/memory story that impacted you as a child?
13. The author wrote the book in strict chronological order and then reordered it before it was published. Could you tell? Did the alternating between past and present help or hinder the book?
14. How often do you think children "vanish without a trace" these days with the CSI style capabilities of the investigators?
15. Is it believable that an abducted child would not return to her family once an adult?
16. Would you find the strength to go on with your life after a tragedy like this?

## References

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