



STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold

About This Book

When we first meet Susie Salmon, she is already in heaven. As she looks down from this strange new place, she tells us, in the fresh and spirited voice of a fourteen-year-old girl, a tale that is both haunting and full of hope.

In the weeks following her death, Susie watches life on Earth continuing without her—her school friends trading rumors about her disappearance, her family holding out hope that she'll be found, her killer trying to cover his tracks. As months pass without leads, Susie sees her parents' marriage being contorted by loss, her sister hardening herself in an effort to stay strong, and her little brother trying to grasp the meaning of the word gone.

And she explores the place called heaven. It looks a lot like her school playground, with the good kind of swing sets. There are counselors to help newcomers adjust and friends to room with. Everything she ever wanted appears as soon as she thinks of it—except the thing she most wants: to be back with the people she loved on Earth.

With compassion, longing, and a growing understanding, Susie sees her loved ones pass through grief and begin to mend. Her father embarks on a risky quest to ensnare her killer. Her sister undertakes a feat of remarkable daring. And the boy Susie cared for moves on, only to find himself at the center of a miraculous event.

The Lovely Bones is luminous and astonishing, a novel that builds out of grief the most hopeful of stories. In the hands of a brilliant new writer, this story of the worst thing a family can face is transformed into a suspenseful and even funny novel about love, memory, joy, heaven, and healing.

Discussion Questions

1. In Susie's Heaven, she is surrounded by things that bring her peace. What would your Heaven be like? Is it surprising that in Susie's inward, personal version of the hereafter there is no God or larger being that presides?
2. Why does Ruth become Susie's main connection to Earth? Was it accidental that Susie touched Ruth on her way up to Heaven, or was Ruth actually chosen to be Susie's emotional conduit?
3. Rape is one of the most alienating experiences imaginable. Susie's rape ends in murder and changes her family and friends forever. Alienation is transferred, in a sense, to Susie's parents and siblings. How do they each experience loneliness and solitude after Susie's death?
4. Why does the author include details about Mr. Harvey's childhood and his memories of his mother? By giving him a human side, does Sebold get us closer to understanding his motivation? Sebold explained in an interview about the novel that murderers "are not animals but men," and that is what makes them so frightening. Do you agree?
5. Discuss the way in which guilt manifests itself in the various characters - Jack, Abigail, Lindsay, Mr. Harvey, Len Fenerman.
6. "Pushing on the inbetween" is how Susie describes her efforts to connect with those she has left behind on Earth. Have you ever felt as though someone was trying to communicate with you from "the inbetween"?
7. Does Buckley really see Susie, or does he make up a version of his sister as a way of understanding, and not being too emotionally damaged by, her death? How do you explain tragedy to a child? Do you think Susie's parents do a good job of helping Buckley comprehend the loss of his sister?
8. Susie is killed just as she was beginning to see her mother and father as real people, not just as parents. Watching her parents' relationship change in the wake of her death, she begins to understand how they react to the world and to each other. How does this newfound understanding affect Susie?
9. Can Abigail's choice to leave her family be justified?
10. Why does Abigail leave her dead daughter's photo outside the Chicago Airport on her way back to her family?
11. Susie observes that "The living deserve attention, too." She watches her sister, Lindsay, being neglected as those around her focus all their attention on grieving for Susie. Jack refuses to allow Buckley to use Susie's clothes in his garden. When is it time to let go?
12. Susie's Heaven seems to have different stages, and climbing to the next stage of Heaven requires her to remove herself from what happens on Earth. What is this process like for Susie?
13. In *The Lovely Bones*, adult relationships (Abigail and Jack, Ray's parents) are dysfunctional and troubled, whereas the young relationships (Lindsay and Samuel, Ray and Susie, Ray and Ruth) all seem to have depth, maturity, and potential. What is the author saying about young love? About the trials and tribulations of married life?
14. Is Jack Salmon allowing himself to be swallowed up by his grief? Is there a point where he should have let go? How does his grief process affect his family? Is there something admirable about holding on so tightly to Susie's memory and not denying his profound sadness?
15. Ray and Susie's final physical experience (via Ruth's body) seems to act almost as an exorcism that sweeps away, if only temporarily, Susie's memory of her rape. What is the significance of this act for Susie, and does it serve to counterbalance the violent act that ended Susie's life?



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16. Alice Sebold seems to be saying that out of tragedy comes healing. Susie's family fractures and comes back together, a town learns to find strength in each other. Do you agree that good can come of great trauma?

Author Biography

Alice Sebold is the author of the memoir *Lucky*. She has been chosen by the *Village Voice* as a Writer on the Verge and has written for the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. She lives in California with her husband, Glen David Gold.

Extras

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