

Five Mile House

By Karen Novak

Reading Group Guide

The introduction, discussion questions, suggested reading list that follow are designed to enhance your group's discussion of Karen Novak's *Five Mile House*. We hope they will provide useful ways of talking about a suspenseful haunted-house mystery that is also the compelling story about the lengths to which a mother will go to protect her children.

About the book

Leslie Stone is a talented, committed detective who has spent too much time hunting down child sexual abusers and killers. One day her mind simply snaps, and having seen the body of a four-year-old victim who looks much like her own daughter, she shoots the suspect in the interview room. A plea of temporary insanity keeps her out of jail. When she emerges from months in a mental hospital, jobless and fragile, her husband and two young daughters no longer trust her sanity. Her husband Greg has taken a new job in the rural town of Wellington, restoring an enormous old house, long abandoned, built by the wealthy Joshua Bly. The house has a notorious history; just after the family moved in, in 1889, Bly's wife Eleanor jumped from its tower window, having first murdered six of her seven children.

Leslie soon discovers that Wellington is far from being the idyllic haven it appears. For one thing, the town is the home of a thriving coven of witches—and Gwen Garrett, the historical consultant who hired Greg, has done so only because Leslie bears an uncanny resemblance to Eleanor Bly. For another, Five Mile House apparently holds the hidden key to a cabalistic volume called the *Analecta Seriatum* that the witches are trying to keep out of the hands of the wrong people.

Still haunted by frightening visions from her own past and prey to occasional hallucinations, soon Leslie is also haunted by Eleanor Bly. She can't help but try to get to the truth of what happened at Five Mile House in 1889, and before long her own children are in grave danger. Karen Novak has created a feisty, smart, and complicated female detective in Leslie Stone, a woman readers who in the course of the story will discover just how far mothers will go to protect their children.

For discussion:

1. The novel's prologue and first chapter both open with the voice of Eleanor Bly, who has been dead for more than a hundred years. Eleanor has a special relationship with Leslie, though Leslie doesn't know it yet. How does the first chapter work to show what is haunting Leslie? Does the first chapter work to clarify the connection between Eleanor and Leslie, or rather to raise suspense about what is to come?
2. When Leslie tells her partner that she heard Amy's voice on the subway on her way to work that morning, her partner responds in a way that suggests he thinks she is psychotic (16). Does the fact that Leslie occasionally hears voices and sees visions make her view of plot events unreliable, or not?

3. What is Leslie's impression when she first learns of her uncanny resemblance to Eleanor Bly from a newspaper photograph (43)? Why has Harry Wellington sought to bring Leslie to the town, and at what point in the novel are his intentions made clear?
4. Eleanor Bly addresses the reader directly in first-person narration; at times she tells her own story, and at times she comments on Leslie's story. What is the effect of this ghostly narration? What does Eleanor seek from Leslie?
5. What is the attraction, for Leslie, of Phillip Hogarth? Is this aspect of the story a parallel to Eleanor's attraction to Joshua? Is he lying or telling the truth when he says to her, "I am not the enemy" (194)?
6. Discuss the character of Leslie Stone. What is admirable or interesting about her? What are her strengths? What are her failings?
7. Delores tells Leslie about the relationship between the *Analecta* and the coven's concrete business, as well as what Joshua and Isabel did on the night of the autumnal equinox of 1889 (144-45). In the chapters that follow, alternating with Leslie's story, Eleanor tells her version of the events leading up to that night. How was Eleanor manipulated by her husband and his sister? How did she arrive at her final decision?
8. How important a character is Diana Wellington? Is Diana similar to Eleanor Bly, in having married a rich man with an interest in the occult? What is the reason for Diana's strange relationship with her son Jack?
9. Delores also tells Leslie that Gwen Garrett was excluded from the coven because she had "rented herself out to the Wellingtons" and that Eleanor Bly, by killing her children, "found a way to stop them, for a little while" (166). Can these revelations be pieced together so that the reader, along with Leslie, can begin to understand how the plot will unfold? Is the plot simple or difficult to follow?
10. Emma goes missing, and in the midst of trying to keep her mind from shattering, Leslie sees Gwen from a distance and is convinced that Gwen has taken her child (177-78). But Gwen has committed suicide. Is this one of the novel's most frightening moments? How surprising is the revelation that Gwen is in fact alive, just as Leslie has suspected?
11. Of the characters in the novel, who are the most realistically drawn (Phillip Hogarth, Greg, Gwen, Diana, Eleanor)? Does Eleanor come across as a sympathetic figure or a pathetic one? What about Gwen Garrett? What is the effect on Gwen of losing another child to miscarriage?
12. Leslie is the image of Eleanor Bly, and she now lives with her family in the cottage that Eleanor and her children inhabited before Five Mile House was completed. Why does Novak create this doubling in the two characters? How are Leslie and Eleanor similar, and how are they not? Does the doubling create suspense, in that the reader may fear that what Eleanor did, Leslie may also do?

13. Asked in an interview about the idea of mothers who kill their children, Novak replied, "It's a dark subject matter. And there is a darker side of motherhood that you don't see addressed often: that impulse that, I think, is universal within mothers of how far you would go to protect your children. ... It's one of the major themes of the book. I don't try to answer that question. I just propose how far out that line could go. I like my questions well-defined but, ultimately, unanswered" (*Syracuse Herald American*, 12 Nov 2000). Eleanor Bly killed her children in order to protect them; was she right or wrong to do so?

14. Leslie loves her children and her husband, but her children are wary of her, her husband is constantly working, and she takes a lover during the course of the story. Does it seem that her marriage is over, or that it can be saved?

15. Discuss the relationship between Joshua Bly and his sister Isabel. Are they partners in what they hope to bring about, or does the description of Joshua Bly carrying the body of his youngest son (204) indicate that Isabel is the monstrous one, and that she has plans he doesn't share?

16. Discuss the events of Chapter 35, and how the various strands of the plot are pieced together here. Why is Amy reintroduced (217, 219)? What does Gwen really want to achieve, and is she a kind of reincarnation of Isabel?

17. What is in the envelope that Leslie returns to Five Mile House to destroy? Setting the envelope afire, she knows she is also burning the house down. Eleanor speaks the story's last words; what does she mean by her final sentences?

Suggested reading:

Dan Brown, *Angels & Demons*; Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*; Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*; P. D. James, *Innocent Blood*; Stephen King, *Salem's Lot*; Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, *The Best Ghost Stories of J. S. LeFanu*; Dennis McFarland, *A Face at the Window*; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*; Joyce Carol Oates, *American Gothic Tales*; Chuck Palahniuk, *Diary*; Ruth Rendell, *A Demon in My View*.

Karen Novak lives in Mason, Ohio, with her husband and two daughters.