

Innocence

By Karen Novak

Reading Group Guide

About this guide

The discussion questions that follow are meant to enhance your reading group's conversation about Karen Novak's *Innocence*, a gripping psychological thriller about a daughter's loss of innocence and the ways in which the daughter's trauma forces the mother to come to terms with her own past.

About this book

Detective Leslie Stone began her work as a girl of twelve, when her father was the chief of police in their small town. A serial rapist was on the loose, kidnapping and assaulting eleven young girls before eventually setting them free. Leslie secretly kept a notebook of observations and clues, hoping to see what her father was missing. Years later, she is living back in that same town, in that same house, and her daughter Molly's best friend Lydia goes missing after a night of drunken partying. Five boys are accused of having sexually abused her before she disappeared, and soon the town is caught up in hysteria. Molly asks for Leslie's help in finding Lydia, and in proving that the boys are innocent. Literally haunted by visions of the abused girls from her father's unsolved case, Leslie is soon drawn in to an investigation in which the stories keep shifting, the truth is elusive, and Molly is holding back some revelations of her own.

For discussion

1. The novel opens with Leslie Stone investigating the disappearance eight years earlier of a girl named Vanessa Bateson. How does Leslie's investigation of the Vanessa Bateson case cause "the fragile partition between the present and past [to] burst open" (8)? What is the relation between the Bateson case and the rest of the story?
2. Leslie explains her separation from her family, and her occasional hallucinations, as follows: "These apparitions were my mind superimposing its sorrow on the already sorrowful world. It was this sorrow and the unpredictable but inevitable arrival of the next apparition that had forced me to push my daughters out of my immediate orbit into the stable system of their father's custody. I couldn't protect them from everything, but I could protect them from me. The things I saw. The things I might do about what I'd seen" (15). Does the novel suggest that Leslie carries memories that are simply unbearable? What happens to young people (like her younger self, like Molly) who become witness to unbearable events?
3. Novak's previous novel *Five Mile House* saw the imminent breakup of her marriage to Greg; in *Innocence* Leslie and Greg are making efforts to repair their marriage and their family life. What is realistic about this aspect of the novel, and does the reader have equal sympathy for Greg and Leslie as they try to overcome the distance between them?
4. The story of the young Leslie's experience of the Nightingale case begins on page 27 with the chapter heading "counterclockwise." On page 267 Leslie tells herself, "If you turn the pages of your notebook backward you can make time undo itself." Why is the

time sequence of this narrative reversed, and what is the effect of this reversal on the reading experience?

5. Leslie's father tells her that the suspect is obviously guilty because he says he's innocent (251-3). How does this idea of innocence reflect upon the book's title? In what other ways does the novel explore the meaning or possibility of innocence?

6. The young Leslie watches unseen as her father brutally beats a suspect, nearly killing him, and places an orange hat on the suspect's bloody head to create a piece of evidence that will pin the suspect to the crimes (166). From this point forward Leslie begins to experience lapses in memory and she loses track of time. Is her father's crime the origin of Leslie's trauma? How does her father's experience help to explain the fact that Leslie took justice into her own hands as well (8)?

7. How are the two stories—of Leslie as a young girl and of Molly as a young girl—tied together thematically? Are the traumatic events experienced by mother and daughter similar? If so, how?

8. On page 94 Leslie replaces one hat with another, and hides one in the attic under a floor board. The hat is the key to the plot; how does Novak handle the intricacies of this detail? What is revealed on the final page of the book?

9. Leslie thinks, "If you go backward, the monster puts on his orange hat and changes the Nightingales back into their original human form leaving them no memory of the transformation" (267). If you have read Hans Christian Anderson's story, what is its relationship to the unsolved crimes?

10. In her depiction of Molly, Lydia, and Tim, how does Novak represent the problems of adolescents in the current culture of television and MTV? What does she suggest might be wrong with how children are raised? What is Leslie's approach to mothering an adolescent?

11. Comment on the structure of the narrative and Novak's decision to alternate between various characters' points of view as well as two different time schemes. How does the structure work to provide the reader with information that not all the characters share? How surprising is the revelation about what really happened to Lydia?

12. Karen Novak has said of the Leslie Stone books, "the novels are meant to stand alone and yet comment on one another in a way that enriches the experience no matter what order you read them in." If you have read either *Five Mile House* or *Wilderness*, how do they share certain concerns? What changes do you see in the main character?

13. What is the symbolic significance of the oak tree, of the termites that infest it years later? How does Novak use this motif throughout the story?

14. "It was the lesson of my illness...that the past cannot be fixed, only survived and set free to be exactly what it was," says Leslie (149). What action does Leslie take, at the end of this story, to "set free the past"? How does this change her relationship to her own past, and her loyalty to her father?

15. The 15-year old Leslie thinks to herself: “And now, you have betrayed him. Or protected him. You aren’t sure. You’re not sure of anything except that you would give anything to not know what you now know. But that’s what you get for being a bad daughter. Listening where you shouldn’t be listening, seeing what you were never meant to see” (27). Yet at this point, the reader doesn’t understand what she means. How is this withholding of information mirrored in Molly’s story about Lydia? What do we understand about Molly’s story at the end of the novel that we didn’t know earlier?

16. About her focus on the darker aspects of human experience, Novak has said, “Frankly, happiness doesn’t interest me as a subject or as a conclusion to a story. No one I’ve met needs help with being happy; it is the lonely and the frightening aspects of life that seem to require the company and comfort of a fellow traveler.” Like *Five Mile House*, *Innocence* examines deeply traumatic experiences. How does the end of *Innocence* suggest that hope and healing are possible for Leslie and her family?

Suggested reading

Kate Atkinson, *Case Histories*; William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury*; Jodi Picoult, *Keeping Faith*; Stephen King, *The Shining*; P. D. James, *Innocent Blood*; Ruth Rendell, *Harm Done*; Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo, *The Locked Room*; Jane Smiley, *A Hundred Acres*; Andrew Vachss, *Flood*.

Karen Novak is the author of the novels *Five Mile House* and *Ordinary Monsters*. She lives in Mason, Ohio.