

# Are You Sleeping

By Kathleen Barber

## Reading Group Guide

*This readers group guide for **Are You Sleeping** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your readers group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

### Introduction

After an adventurous period touring Africa and Asia in her twenties, Josie Buhrman has settled into a comfortable life in New York City. Her job at the neighborhood bookstore is steady and pleasant, and she can rely on her live-in boyfriend, Caleb, when not away on business, to share leisurely hours in their apartment with cups of coffee and the daily crossword puzzle.

But Josie also keeps a secret past from her dreamy partner. Her father was murdered when she was just a girl. Grief-stricken, Josie's mother abandoned her twin daughters to the care of their aunt and joined up with a strange cult in California. Her sister, Lanie, also grew increasingly distant, ultimately severing the last remnants of their once-fierce bond by stealing Josie's high-school sweetheart.

And when enterprising young journalist Poppy Parnell turns Josie's private ordeal into a very public trial with a hit podcast revisiting her father's murder case, her long-absent mother suddenly commits suicide, and the newly laid foundation of Josie's new identity begins to crack beneath her. In order to fly back to the Midwest and make arrangements, Josie has to come clean with Caleb—but comes to find that the truths still buried at home go deeper than those she even knew to hide.

### Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. *Are You Sleeping* makes inventive formal use of social media at the end of each chapter, from podcast transcriptions to representations of threads on Twitter. How does the author's choice to reveal many of the Buhrman family's secrets through social media, rather than from Josie's point of view, affect the way she structures the story?
2. Josie spends a lot of time weighing her decision to lie to Caleb about her past. When she does finally come clean, she explains to him that she had told him her mother was dead because "she abandoned us [. . .] For all I knew, she was dead. [. . .] I'd devoted a lot of time and effort to distancing my old life from my new one. I tried to forget about my family" (p. 149). How did you first react to this admission? Do you agree or disagree with her reasoning?
3. People react in a variety of ways to death, as Barber keenly depicts when Josie must struggle to swallow "inappropriate laughter" at her mother's visitation (p. 92). How do you see Josie's feelings about her mother changing over the course of this difficult occasion? In what ways does she compare herself to Lanie through the ways each sister chooses to grieve?
4. Aunt A understands her sister's abandonment of her children as a symptom of guilt—over the deaths of her brother, her parents, and finally her husband. For which circumstances, given what you learn at the end of the novel, do you feel Erin rightly assumes blame? How much does her victimhood during her marriage explain her actions after Chuck's death?
5. Josie's feelings about Lanie and Adam's union depend a lot on whether Adam confused one twin for the other when he first slept with Lanie. How much consolation do you think it offers Josie to trust that the affair started as a case of mistaken identity? Do you think she ever genuinely believed that explanation to be true?
6. Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* held an important place in Erin's heart during her life. How might she have related the novel's famous opening line—"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (p. 184)—to her own experience? What other features of Tolstoy's novel might help explain why she would choose to convey her suicide note to her daughters on its pages?
7. When confronted with the argument that the unvarnished approach of the *Reconsidered* podcast might have contributed to Erin's suicide, Poppy emphasizes that "it wasn't a group of strangers" that killed her, but "the ghosts of her own past" (p. 194). What do you think of this interpretation? To what degree is suicide a personal choice or a tragedy of circumstance?
8. Josie feels steadfastly that the podcast has turned "[her] father's untimely death into a commodity" (p. 195) and "taken the single most horrible thing that's ever happened to [her] and repackaged it as entertainment" (pp. 196–197). To what degree do you think journalists have an obligation to treat living subjects with sensitivity? Does the need to inform the public outweigh the risk crime reporting runs of commodifying the pain and suffering of

victims?



9. Photographs appear frequently in the novel as windows into the past and clues about the circumstances surrounding Chuck's murder. How do photographs like Lanie's unhappy portrait at her wedding (p. 73), the snapshot of the family at Mount Rushmore, or the photo in the garden with a glimpse of Melanie Cave in the background (p. 220) illuminate details beyond the reach of memory? In which ways do they also mislead?

10. While Poppy easily dismisses that "Lanie Buhrman is not a victim" (p. 231), Josie comes to realize at the end of the novel that her sister's pain "went beyond witnessing his death, it even went beyond seeing our mother be the one to pull the trigger—it was the unrelenting torment of unconsciously believing she could have done something to stop it, that she was responsible for the loss of our parents" (p. 306). How does this realization shed light on Lanie's development as a character? Is her self-doubt about motherhood justified? Is her marriage a healthy bond?

11. As a result of the trauma she has experienced, Lanie's memory of the words of her father's killer evolves from "first the girl" (p. 87) to finally "first Pearl, and now . . ." (p. 289). Consider the theme of memory in *Are You Sleeping*. In what ways does Barber demonstrate how the mind alters or constructs reality? How reliable should a child be as an eyewitness to the murder of his or her parent?

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. The format of *Reconsidered* bears some striking resemblances to the first season of the investigative journalism podcast *Serial*. Listen to the series and discuss in which ways *Serial* might have been an inspiration for the language and style of Barber's fictional podcast. Compare Sarah Koenig's journalistic approach specifically to that of Poppy Parnell.

2. The title *Are You Sleeping* could be taken a few different ways. Put together an argument for an interpretation of the title's meaning that might surprise the other members of your book club and present it to them.

3. Fans and critics of *Reconsidered* alike use Twitter to express interesting ethical points at various times during the novel. Choose one of the Twitter handles Barber has invented and stage a debate in which each member of your book club maintains the point of view of one of the fictional users regarding the role investigative journalism should play in our society.