



The Weight of Water

A Novel Tag - Author of Resistance and Strange Fits of Passion

by Anita Shreve

Reading Group Guide

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the similarities between Jean and Maren? In what ways are they different?
2. The Weight of Water is both a love story and a whodunit. Who do you think really killed Anethe and Karen? What evidence is there to support Louis Wagner's innocence or guilt?
3. Atmosphere - the terribly rough climate and unbearably close living quarters -- plays a significant role in the characters' psychological states. To what extent are these external conditions responsible for the events of the novel?
4. "No one can know a story's precise reality," Jean points out (p. 117). Discuss the significance of this statement as it applies to Jean's reading of Maren's journal. Should she -- should we -- believe Maren's document as truth? To what extent does Jean fill in the blanks of Maren's story to explain her own life? Do you think Jean maintains enough objectivity to write a fair account of the murders?
5. The Weight of Water is concerned with the subject of jealousy and its consequences. Discuss this theme as it emerges in the exchanges between Jean and Maren and their families. Do you believe that Adeline and Thomas were having an affair?
6. Maren and Evan have a very close sibling relationship. What events from their childhood fostered this attachment? Is there evidence that their relationship goes beyond that of brother and sister? How does Anethe's arrival on the scene affect this relationship?
7. Jean ponders, "What moment was it that I might have altered? What point in time was it that I might have moved one way instead of another, had one thought instead of another?" (p. 192). Are there moments in which Jean could have acted differently and thereby changed the course of the events that followed? If so, identify them. How much control do Jean and Maren have over their respective fates? How much does anyone?
8. It is often small resentments and indiscretions that lead to greater misdeeds. What small offenses do Jean and Maren commit? Do you feel these acts should be taken into account when determining their culpability for greater crimes?
9. How does the structure of the story -- the weaving together of Maren's story with Jean's -- underscore the novel's theme? Have you ever been so influenced by an event in the past that it changed your present or your future?
10. Jean's story begins with a plea for absolution: "I have to let this story go. It is with me all the time now, a terrible weight." Similarly, Maren's document opens with an appeal for vindication: "If it so please the Lord, I shall, with my soul and heart and sound mind, write the true and actual tale of the incident which continues to haunt my humble footsteps." (p. 39). How do these pleas affect you as a reader? Does it make you more sympathetic to the characters, more willing to believe in their innocence?

