

Promise Not to Tell: A Novel
by Jennifer McMahon
Reading Group Guide & Discussion Questions

Introduction

A woman's past and present collide with unexpected results in this hauntingly beautiful debut novel set in rural Vermont

Interweaving past and present, *Promise Not To Tell* is a story of friendship, secrets, murder, and redemption. At its center is Kate Cypher, a reserved 41-year-old school nurse who returns to the small town of New Canaan, VT, to care for her Alzheimer's-afflicted mother. The night she arrives, a young girl is murdered. Slowly Kate is drawn into the investigation—and deep into the childhood she's tried to escape—for the killing eerily echoes the death of another young girl: her childhood friend, Del. Poor, misunderstood Del suffered the taunts of classmates who shunned her and called her "Potato Girl." But in Del, 10-year-old Kate found a kindred spirit, until a painful falling out shattered their relationship shortly before Del's death.

As the investigation unfolds, the facets of Kate's life collide in a terrifying way: her mother is quickly deteriorating, her old friends are never quite what they seem, and the ghosts of her childhood have emerged to haunt her. Tautly written, deeply insightful, and beautifully evocative, *Promise Not To Tell* is a riveting and unforgettable debut.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the opening of *Promise Not To Tell*, Kate Cypher says, "I killed someone tonight." How did this shape your first impressions of Kate? Does her confession make her more trustworthy, or less so?
2. *Promise Not To Tell* interweaves past and present from chapter to chapter. How did this affect your reading of the story? Do you think this was an effective structure?
3. Del and Kate are both outsiders, but in different ways. What are the differences? What are some of the similarities between the two girls?
4. Kate finds clues that her mother might have been out in the woods the night Tori was murdered. Should she have investigated this further or even gone to the police with her suspicions? Why or why not?
5. Kate says that once she loves someone, it's for life. How does the Nicky Kate meets as an adult compare to the Nicky she knew as a child? How have her feelings for him changed?
6. When Nicky tells Kate that he thinks Del has come back, Kate thinks about the pervasive legend of the Potato Girl. Why do you think Del has achieved such mythic status in town and what role do you think this plays in how people view Tori's murder?

7. Del's sheriff's star plays an important role in the story. Kate refers to the star as a talisman. What do you think the star symbolizes to Del? To Kate (as a kid and as an adult)? To Del's killer? Are there other talismans in the book?

8. How were you affected by Del? As you learn more and more about the secrets she kept, do you see her as a strong person or someone that needed to be protected?

9. At one point, Kate confesses that if she could go back and change any part of her life, the two moments she would redo take place on the day Del was killed. How does Kate's guilt over what happened that final day shape the woman she grows up to become?

10. *Promise Not To Tell* takes place in the fictional town of New Canaan, Vermont. Much of the book is set at New Hope and the Griswolds' farm down the road. How important is the setting in the story?

11. Kate is a skeptic who struggles to find rational explanations for the bizarre events that begin happening to her. Would the story be different if she weren't so skeptical? Were you, as a reader, skeptical as well?

12. This book has elements of a coming of age novel, ghost story, and mystery. How would you define it? How does it compare to other books you've read in these genres?

13. All of the main characters are keeping secrets, some dangerous, some incriminating, some shameful. What importance do these secrets play in the story? Is there power in keeping a secret? Honor?

14. The final chapter is told from Opal's point of view. Why do you think the author chose to make this shift?

About the Author

Jennifer McMahon is the author of *Promise Not to Tell*, *Island of Lost Girls*, and a novel for young adults, *My Tiki Girl*. She grew up in suburban Connecticut, and graduated from Goddard College in 1991. Over the years, she has been a house painter, farm worker, paste-up artist, pizza delivery person, homeless shelter staff member, and has worked with mentally ill adults and children in a few different capacities. Currently, she lives in Vermont with her partner, Drea, and their daughter, Zella.

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