

The Winter People

A Novel

By Jennifer McMahon

About This Guide

A simmering literary thriller of the unbreakable bonds between mothers and their children, *The Winter People* showcases the spellbinding talent that has made Jennifer McMahon a bestselling storyteller. This tale of ghostly secrets and dark choices takes us to rural West Hall, Vermont, a town known for strange disappearances. The most legendary victim is Sara Harrison Shea. In 1908, she was found dead in the field behind her house just months after the tragic death of her daughter, Gertie. More than a century later, Sara's farmhouse is inhabited by a family that savors the simple life, existing off the grid and practicing sustainable farming. When their mother suddenly vanishes without a trace, it's up to nineteen-year-old daughter Ruthie to track her down. Desperate for clues, she discovers Sara's diary hidden in her mother's bedroom, opening Ruthie's eyes to a world of "sleeper" souls—and the desperate mourners who dare to wake them.

The questions and discussion topics that follow are intended to enhance your reading of Jennifer McMahon's *The Winter People*. We hope they will enrich your experience of this mesmerizing novel.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. At the heart of the novel is the longing to be reunited with a loved one who has died. How would you respond to this possibility, even if you could only see your beloved for one week? What risks would you take to take to experience such a reunion?
2. What was it like to read Sara's diary, alternating with scenes from other time periods? Did Sara's words change your vision of the spirit world? Did her bond with Gertie remind you of your own experience with a mother's love?
3. When Alice and her family inhabit Sara's house and her land, how does that environment transform them? Do you believe that the history of a locale can influence your present-day experiences there?
4. Ruthie and Fawn have been raised to question authority and to live a non-materialistic life. What benefits and challenges does their upbringing give them when their mother goes missing? Ultimately, what did Alice try to teach her daughters about becoming fulfilled women?
5. Reread the excerpt from Amelia's introduction on the book's first page. How do Amelia and the other townspeople react to their legacies? Why did Reverend Ayers feel so threatened by Auntie?
6. Martin cherishes Sara and continually strives to please her. Does she love him in equal measure, or does her ancestry make it too difficult for an outsider to fully share a life with her?
7. How was Sara affected by her history with her siblings, Constance and Jacob? Why did their father easily become dependent on Auntie, while Sara's mother didn't trust her?

8. Did Tom and Bridget O'Rourke have ethical motivations? Did Candace? How do the revelations about them affect Ruthie's sense of self?
9. How did you react to Gertie's hunger? What is its significance to the maternal women who must care for her?
10. Discuss Katherine and Gary's love for each other. How does their marriage compare to the others presented in the book? How do Katherine's art and Gary's photography give them a unique perspective on life and memory? What does their story indicate about whether a sleeper should be awakened?
11. Consider the rules for waking a sleeper. What do the words and the ingredients represent in terms of the cycles of life and the nature of death?
12. What were your theories about the many unsolved deaths in West Hall? Did your instincts prove to be correct when the truth about the Devil's Hand was revealed?
13. In *The Winter People* and previous novels by Jennifer McMahon that you have enjoyed, how is the author able to make surreal situations seem highly realistic? What role do fear and courage play in each of her books?

Guide written by Amy Clements