

THE ONE I LEFT BEHIND

by Jennifer McMahon

Reading Group Guide & Discussion Questions

Introduction

Reggie has told almost no one about the summer of 1985.

She was thirteen and awkward, her only friends the school outcasts -- Charlie, the shy son of a local detective, and Tara, a goth kid who harbored a dark secret. That summer a serial killer known as Neptune terrorized their sleepy Connecticut suburb – abducting women one at a time, leaving a severed hand on the steps of the police department to advertise the crime, then, five days later, leaving the body in a conspicuous spot in town.

When Reggie’s mother, Vera -- an ex-model with many “boyfriends” and a thirst for gin -- disappeared and her hand showed up at the police station, Reggie, Charlie and Tara plunged into a seedy world of dive bars and pay-by-the-hour motels trying to find her. But after five days, no body turned up, and the murders stopped. Both Vera and Neptune seemed to have vanished.

Twenty-five years later, Reggie is an award-winning architect with a seemingly perfect -- if a bit lonely -- life when she learns that Vera has turned up alive in a homeless shelter. Vera is confused, speaking in riddles and nursery rhymes, unable (or unwilling) to explain where she’s been all these years. But Reggie is certain of one thing: if Vera is back, Neptune may be as well. And it’s up to Reggie to sift through the clues in her own past, unravel her mother’s riddles, and find Neptune before he kills again.

Questions for Discussion

1. As an adult, Reggie has done everything she can to put the past behind her, and has told almost no one about what happened to her mother. How did the events of that summer shape the woman she becomes? Do you think we can choose how tragedy shapes us? Is it ever possible to truly put the past behind us?

2. Reggie's mother, Vera, is a very complicated character and Reggie spends much of the book (in both the 1985 sections and those set in the present) trying to understand her. What are Vera's motivations for all the lies she tells? Are there times when it's okay for a parent to fabricate a story? Do you think Vera's stories affected the way Reggie relates to others?
3. We meet most of the characters in 1985 and then again in 2010. How have they changed? In what ways are they the same? Do you think you carry the same person inside you that you did when you were 13? If you could go back and give your thirteen-year-old self one piece of advice, what would it be?
4. Toward the beginning of the book, Reggie tells Len that people are not trees and are not meant to put down roots; that our ancestors were hunter-gatherers and life is about movement. How does this change by the end of the book? How do you think these changes will affect Reggie's life and work?
5. One of the things at the heart of *The One I Left Behind* is the friendship between Reggie and Tara. They are both outsiders, but with very different personalities and secrets. At one point, Tara tells Reggie, "You're just like me. I've known it all along." Is Tara right? In what ways are they alike? What do you think draws them to each other? Does anything positive come of their friendship?
6. One of the secrets of the summer of 1985 is what really happened to Sid. How did this incident and the way each character dealt with it shape Reggie over the years? What do you think of Stu Berr's part in the kids' silence?
7. There are a lot of physical scars in the book -- Reggie's ear and Vera's hand; the scars Reggie and Tara share. Why do you think the author chose to include these scars? What do they symbolize to you?
8. Reggie is an award-winning architect known for blurring lines and merging unlikely ideas and objects. How do the skills that have brought her success in her career come into play when she finds herself tracking down Neptune?
9. Reggie has a strained relationship with her aunt Lorraine. Do you sympathize with Lorraine at all? Is she responsible for what

happens to Vera? Do your feelings about Lorraine change throughout the book?

10. Len's astrology chart shows that Reggie has Neptune in the 12th house. Reggie imagines herself as having a little piece of the killer inside her; when she finds herself in dire straits she draws upon this idea to give her strength. Do you think that good can come from accessing the darker, more hidden parts of ourselves?

About the Author

Jennifer McMahon is the author of *Promise Not to Tell*, *Island of Lost Girls*, *Dismantled*, and *Don't Breathe a Word*. She lives in Vermont with her partner, Drea, and their daughter, Zella.

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