

You
By Joanna Briscoe

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *You*, a dark and sensuous novel about illicit affairs in the English countryside.

About this book

The Bannan family is caught in something even messier than a love triangle. It is the 1970s, and Dora Bannan has just moved with her family to the moors of England, a hippie paradise. Dora teaches music at the progressive school that her teenaged daughter, Cecilia, attends. But Dora falls in love with a female art teacher, Elisabeth Dahl, and Cecilia becomes obsessed with her English teacher—Elisabeth's husband, James Dahl. Mother and daughter are both desperate to keep their infatuations hidden. At the Bannans' Christmas party, Cecilia is amazed when James Dahl responds to her flirting. Slowly, they begin an affair, unfolding tortuously in fits and starts until its abrupt end when Cecilia realizes that she is pregnant. Dora puts Cecilia's infant up for adoption, and Cecilia never recovers from the trauma of letting her baby go.

Twenty years later, Cecilia, her long-term partner, and their three daughters move into her childhood home—Dora has cancer, and Cecilia is desperate to learn more about her lost baby from her weakening mother. But the Dahls are still in the picture—Dora is trying to free herself from Elisabeth's web, and Cecilia reconnects with James Dahl. As Cecilia struggles to choose between the loyal father of her children and her teenage crush, she realizes that her daughters are paying the price for her distraction. Could the child Cecilia has been seeking be nearer now than she realizes?

For discussion

1. Discuss Dora and Patrick's move to Devon in the 1970s. What attracts this young couple to the moorland? What challenges do they face in their new home and community? How does their new environment affect their marriage?
2. Consider Cecilia's inspirations as a reader and writer. Which fictional characters are young Cecilia's role models? How does the moorland inspire her as a children's book writer? How does Cecilia's storytelling spark her daughter Ruth's imagination?
3. Discuss the marriage between James and Elisabeth Dahl. What keeps them together through the years, despite their infidelities? What advantages and disadvantages does the marriage have for each of them? Who seems to have a better understanding of the Dahls' marriage: Cecilia or Dora?
4. According to Dora, "Years later she thought that that was the principal legacy of her tightly sewn childhood: the ability to keep secrets; the necessity to conceal" (41). What secrets does Dora harbor from her husband, from her children, and from Elisabeth? How does Dora pass this legacy of secrecy on to her children?
5. Cecilia thinks of her lost baby as "Mara," yet the child turns out to be a drifter named Dan. What are some of the differences between Cecilia's fantasy and reality, between

Mara and Dan? What are Cecilia's first impressions of Dan? How might she react if she found out his real identity?

6. As Dora compares her relationship with Elisabeth to Cecilia's obsession with Mr. Dahl, she thinks "that Cecilia's experience of love was similar to her own only at a simple level of infatuation, but she felt protective towards her" (60). Is Dora correct in labeling her feelings toward Elisabeth as "love" and Cecilia's feelings toward Mr. Dahl as "infatuation"? What are the similarities and differences between these two romances?
7. Describe Cecilia's relationship with each of her three daughters: Romy, Izzie, and Ruth. Why does she consider Izzie "her good deed, her salvation, the one who filled her with ferocious protective love" (225)? Why is she unable to protect her youngest daughter, Ruth, from her own dangerous fantasies?
8. Compare Haye House, Cecilia's school, to St Anne's, its replacement. How has the school changed since the 1970s? What aspects of the school have remained the same? How do Cecilia and James Dahl feel about these changes?
9. Consider the Christmas party that Dora and Patrick throw at Wind Tor House. How does this scene serve as a turning point in the novel? Which relationships change forever on the night of the party?
10. Discuss how James Dahl has changed over the years. What surprises Cecilia about his appearance when she sees him two decades after their affair? In what ways has he remained the same?
11. Dora comes to regret giving Cecilia's baby away. What motivated her to arrange an illegal adoption? How does Dora react to Cecilia's relentless drive to find her child? Would she have acted differently if she knew that James Dahl was the father of Cecilia's baby? Why or why not?
12. Discuss the setting of the novel: the moorlands of England. How does the author bring this setting to life? How does the moorland look and feel? How do the wild moors reflect the characters' emotions?
13. *You* features three unconventional love stories: Cecilia and James, Dora and Elisabeth, and Izzie and Dan. Which of these three affairs is the most illicit? Which romantic scene do you find most memorable, and why?
14. *You* ends on a note of uncertainty: Dora and Dan are on the verge of revealing Dan's identity, and Cecilia wavers in her choice between Ari and James. Why do you think the novel ends on this cliffhanger? What future do you picture for each of these characters: Cecilia, Ari, James, Dan, and Dora?

Suggested reading

Joanna Briscoe, *Sleep with Me*; Zoe Heller, *What Was She Thinking?: Notes on a Scandal*; Maggie O'Farrell, *The Hand That First Held Mine*; Josephine Hart, *Damage*; Jonathan Coe, *The Rain Before It Falls*; Ian McEwen, *On Chesil Beach*; Julie Myerson, *Something Might Happen*; Joyce Carol Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*; Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith*; Meg Wolitzer, *The Uncoupling*; Patrick McCabe, *Stray Sod Country*.

Joanna Briscoe is the author of the Betty Trask Award–winning *Mothers and Other Lovers*, *Skin*, and *Sleep with Me*, which was published in eleven countries and marked her U.S. debut. Briscoe lives with her family in London, where she has written for all the major newspapers and magazines and has been a columnist for the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. She is currently a literary critic for the *Guardian*.