

“A riveting story of love and obsession.”

—SHELLEY NOBLE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Whisper Beach*

the LAKE

and the

LOST

GIRL

a novel

Jacquelyn Vincenta

# Reading Group Guide

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1. *The Lake and the Lost Girl* focuses on Mary Stone Walker and Lydia Carroll, two female protagonists living at different times in the same small town. What are the similarities and differences between the two women, and how do their stories mirror each other? Which elements seem to be different because of the different time periods in which they live?
2. Mary Stone Walker finds meaning in life through her poetry. Do you have a passion or hobby that drives you forward in the same way, and if so, where does it live in your mind, and what emotions does it inspire?
3. Describe the Carroll family dynamic in the beginning of the novel. How does Nicholas relate differently to his mother than he does to his father? What family elements are having the most impact on him, and did you experience any similar pressures growing up?
4. Both Lydia and Mary are writers, albeit in two very different fields; however, would you agree they had parallel visions for their lives? How are their views of motherhood different, especially in relation to their careers?

5. Frank's hobby costs the family thousands of dollars in antiques. In one scene, he spends over half of the family's savings on a single piece of furniture. If you were Lydia, how would you have reacted in that situation? How far should a partner or family member go to be supportive of another's hopes and dreams (however ambitious or impractical)?
6. Nicholas said that he forged the poem in order to help his parents be happy. Frank was understandably disappointed, and Lydia was at first hurt and confused. If you were his parent, how would you handle this situation?
7. Jack Kenilworth claims he never shared the information he had about Mary Stone Walker because of a promise to his grandfather to protect her secrets (as well as his own). Do you think his secrecy was justified?
8. *The Lake and the Lost Girl* addresses at least two different addictions: Mary's addiction to morphine, and Frank's addiction to solving the mystery of Mary. Do you see any similarities between their downfalls?
9. How are addictions and delusions about reality connected in this story?
10. Lincoln Babcock says "a stack of poems, no matter how exquisite, does not make up for an immoral life." Do you agree with this statement? Do you agree that Mary Stone Walker's life was defined by immoral behavior?
11. If you found out your favorite author wrote his/her best works under the influence of a heavy drug addiction, would that change the way you felt about them?

12. How do you feel about the final chapters of *The Lake and the Lost Girl* and how you left the characters you met? Do you think Frank and Mary “deserved” their respective endings, and could they have avoided them?

# A Conversation with the Author

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## **What was your inspiration for *The Lake and the Lost Girl*?**

We all see slightly different worlds through the filters of our limited minds. But sometimes this tendency seems to grow extreme. People turn away from living beings and issues, seduced by some story that they've made up or adopted from a group. Or they give over to an addiction, and that destroys their moral compass. I've seen so much damage caused by this preference for fantasies over reality, and I wanted to create a novel that showed this conflict play out. Frank is doing this in the most obvious way, but Lydia is also ignoring key elements of reality for the sake of her personal story line. Mary Walker is also hopelessly caught up in addiction, self-delusion, and an unhealthy marriage—she becomes a lightning rod for wishful thinking.

The theme of interpreting fragments of writing or the past just as we wish to is related to seeing the present through blinding filters, and this was also an inspiration behind this story. Reading a stack of texts left behind by a person and imagining we can really understand them or the past is similarly self-centered activity prone to delusion. I hope that juxtaposing scenes of Mary Stone Walker's life against the people of 1999 who are speculating about her illustrates that the past had as much vitality and complexity as our present and is not actually accessible through the handful of "clues" that have survived the destruction of Time.

***The Lake and the Lost Girl* is set along the beautiful, and often mysterious, Michigan lakeshore. Why did you choose this place for your story to unfold?**

The setting of a book is basically where your mind lives during the hours you are writing it, and I deeply love Lake Michigan and its coast—it's a place I always want to "be." I also know it and feel it in my heart, so to me it was as alive as any of the human characters and, in fact, could have had a much larger presence, had the plot allowed! As for it being mysterious, it certainly is at times; that liminal realm of the shoreline, where liquid meets land, the known merges into the unknown... This is where lighthouses are built, and the edge from which people and ships depart, sometimes forever... That is endlessly captivating to me, and a presence that intensifies the themes of so many tales.

**Both Mary and Lydia are writers like you. Which character did you feel more closely connected to, and why? Do you see any qualities of yourself in either of them?**

I felt more connected to Lydia, primarily because of the main condition of her life: balancing the emotional demands of relationships, day-to-day life, and creative work. We say that kind of thing all the time—"balancing career and family"—but what do we mean? In *The Lake and the Lost Girl*, Lydia needs to write genre fiction to support her family, so she has not been able to dedicate her time, her energy, her focus, or even her belief in herself to the task of writing something that might not provide income. Additionally, her husband's lifestyle takes from her financial resources and her mental health, and her son also clearly deserves her thought and time. So the question becomes not so much where to find the "hours" to do all of the things we care about, but how to *grow the self that can see* what matters most and what needs to be done, which might include important changes, sometimes extremely difficult ones.

Neither of these characters reminds me much of myself, although I tried to draw each one with that essential passion for language that brings life alive in the specific way that wanting to create with words does. Relating to those things I witness through language has been a defining feature of my personality for as long as I can remember, and I feel so grateful. For me, it is a quality that adds intrigue and possibility to life.

**Do you have a favorite poem, and if so, why does it continue to resonate with you? We can easily conclude from the story that Frank's favorite author is Mary Stone Walker. Who are your favorite authors, and can you say their work shaped how or what you write?**

These questions are worthy of long, long answers that would bore everyone except me. Favorite poem? So many of them, depending on the emotion and experience I want to immerse myself in. Favorite authors? The same.

But as a very general statement, the most affecting writers and poems for me have been those that capture something elusive, something that reflects qualities of life you rarely see captured in human expression except in dreams and other subconscious flickers. Then again, those same transcendent pieces of literature have a powerful and accurate grounding in the earthly detail from which the sublime arises. I try to learn from this—how to look, what to care about, what language, stories, characters, details might capture some slight filament of what I see and love.

Of the poets I used quotes from at the beginnings of this novel's chapters, I most adore Edna St. Vincent Millay and Louise Bogan. I am so proud to have a handful of their words on the pages of a book with my name on it.

***The Lake and the Lost Girl* has a wonderful past-present dual narrative. What research did you do to bring the late**

**1930s Michigan to life, and what advice do you have for aspiring writers who wish to visit a period era?**

I read a lot of books and online pieces about specific issues, including morphine addiction; abortion techniques and laws; the fishing and lumber industries in 1930s Michigan; clothing and other daily use objects; food and alcohol; the music, drama, and literary scenes of the time; furniture (future antiques) and furniture companies; Chicago tenements; medicine and herbal remedies; and every other related thing that arose in my imagination. I also read a lot of poetry by female American poets of the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as critiques and biographies in some cases.

Not all of the information I read and jotted down was used, of course, but together, the details helped me have a sense of the era, as did reading some other nonfiction and fiction books set in that general time. I would advise that this process is the way to go: immersion in detail, creating a milieu in which your imagination can play with your story elements and characters until they come alive. A friend of mine who has written numerous history books about Michigan said that he could research endlessly and forgo the writing part. I can see why—it's fascinating to discover facts about the past that simultaneously reveal rich variations on the human experience and yet so many continuing themes. Fortunately for me, I find both the research and the writing completely engaging.

**Frank has the strange, almost romantic hobby of “treasure hunting” for Mary Walker poems. What are your hobbies (and do you share a similar obsession with them)?**

Frank's treasure hunts for Mary Walker poems *is* a romantic hobby, for he is driven merely by notions that delight him, almost nothing more. Except for writing, my own hobbies are less mysterious and not obsessive: reading, watercolor painting, gardening, kayaking, cycling, the study of Lithuania, volunteering



at lighthouses, and other nonprofit work. I wouldn't fit well as a character in this novel, except perhaps as a random figure walking in the distance on a pier...or something.

**If you could study one author and their works for the rest of your career, what author would that be?**

Only one? That would have to be Shakespeare! I can't imagine another writer I would learn more from or whose works would keep me better company through all of life's turns. During college, and later in other periods when I've read a great deal of his work at once, I felt almost as if my mind began to vibrate at a different (more enlightened) frequency.

The fact is, I would like to study a number of authors more closely. And I am really grateful that it does not have to be just one.

**Near the beginning of the book, Lydia stands in the attic where Mary crafted many of her poems. Do you have a special sanctuary where you do your writing?**

I do. I have had more than one profoundly special sanctuary where I have written over the last twenty-five years. All of them had a door that shut, many books within reach, and at least one window revealing trees and a patch of sky and through which I was visited by breezes and birds' voices. I am incredibly lucky.

**What would you like readers to take away from your novel?**

That there is a high price to pay for ignoring reality.