

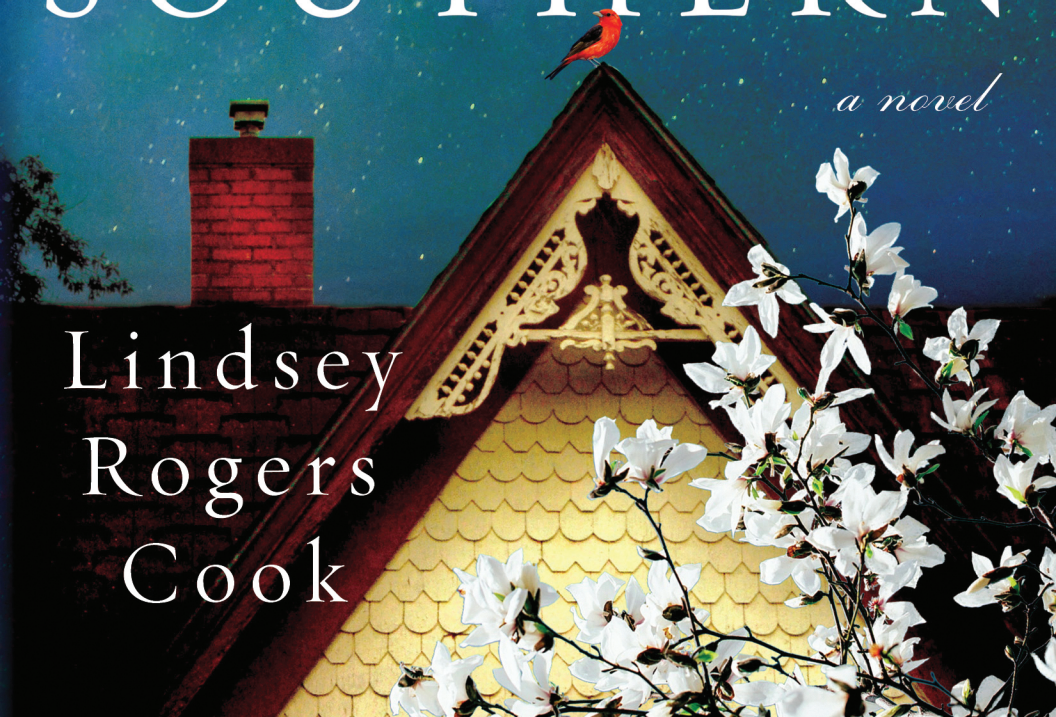
“Imaginative, immersive, and beautifully intense.”

—Patti Callahan Henry, *New York Times* bestselling  
author of *Surviving Savannah*

LEARNING  
*to*  
SPEAK  
SOUTHERN

*a novel*

Lindsey  
Rogers  
Cook



# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Lex ends up calling Cami because she realizes she has no one else to call. Who would you call if you were suffering halfway across the globe?
2. How did you feel about Lex trading Cami's tasks for her mother's entries? Do you think it would be fair for anyone to withhold information about your family? What would you have done in Lex's place?
3. Many of the changes Lex notices around Memphis are the results of gentrification. How does Lex feel while observing these changes? What is lost when a neighborhood is gentrified?
4. Describe your first impression of Margaret from her letters and journal. How does your first impression compare to the Margaret of the final entry? What do you think is the way she changed the most?
5. How would you describe John in one word? How does that word influence the dynamic between John and Margaret?

6. Which of Cami's assignments was your favorite? What was her strategy?
7. When Lex and Margaret argue about the fraudulent loans keeping the hardware store running, Margaret insists, "You just don't know what love is." What does she mean? Do you agree with this definition of love?
8. Describe Lex and Grant's relationship. Do you have a friend who acts as your platonic soulmate?
9. Lex reluctantly goes with Grant to visit with old high school classmates. Have you ever run into an old classmate? How does your experience compare to Lex's?
10. Throughout the book, Lex often thinks of her mother as hypocritical. Knowing all the secrets Margaret was keeping, do you think she was a hypocrite?
11. Reexamining her childhood, Lex realizes that many of the actions she had thought of as snubs from her parents were actually their attempts to protect her from the realities of Margaret's mental instability. How could that miscommunication have been prevented? How would you talk to a child about mental illness?

12. The book delves deep into the concept of family. Do you think there's a significant difference between the family that raises you and the family you choose? Are there people in the book, or in your life, who straddle the line between chosen family and blood family?

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

## **What was your inspiration for this book?**

I started with Memphis—I'll talk about that in the next question—and with the idea of writing about a powerful friendship, even love, that wasn't romantic love. I've read many books that dive into the complicated and beautiful world of a sister-like friendship between two girls, but I'm not aware of many books that focus on a friendship between a boy and a girl when both identify as straight that doesn't end in romance.

I started thinking about these two kids from very different lives, each lonely in their own way, who were friends above all else and without explanation, when everyone around them thought they would eventually be more than that. I grew up as “one of the boys,” and many of my oldest friendships are with men. Grant is named after one of my best friends. Like Lex and Grant, we decided in middle school not to *like* like each other and have been close friends and support systems for each other since.

## **Memphis is the vibrant setting for this story. How did you pick Memphis, and how well did you know it before you started writing?**

Before I started researching, I knew Memphis only from the stories my grandfather told. My mother's side of the family has a

deep history there—my mother was born there, my grandparents both graduated from what is now the University of Memphis, where he “picked her out of a magazine,” as Grant’s father does with his mother, and I still have some distant family who live in the city. My memories of my grandfather have always been laced with Memphis, through the accent I’d study, different from my Georgia relatives, and through his stories about listening to the police blotter the night MLK was murdered, about BBQ from the Rendezvous, his school days at Christian Brothers High School, fishing at his uncle’s pond, where he saw the Peabody Ducks, his paper route for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, and the portrait of Elvis his mother displayed proudly, which she got from one of her friends who worked as a maid at Graceland.

I researched both in person at the Memphis libraries and in books while writing. Some of my favorite reads were the Ask Vance columns in *Memphis* magazine by Vance Lauderdale and the writings of G. Wayne Dowdy, especially *Hidden History of Memphis*.

I also visited the city with my mother. I truly fell in love with Memphis while writing this book and while visiting with the people who live there. Unfortunately, COVID-19 interrupted my plan to travel there with my husband and force him to love it too so that I could convince him to move there, but I haven’t ruled it out!

**As each secret is revealed, Lex gets one step closer to understanding who her real family is. How do you define family?**

Family can be about blood, but it doesn’t need to be. I’m fortunate to be close to the people I’m related to by blood and also to

people who I am not but still consider family. As I wrote in the dedication, I believe the best types of friends are those who feel like family, and the best types of family members are those who feel like friends.

**All the characters in the book feel like real people. Do you ever base your characters on people you know? Did you have a favorite character to write about?**

The characters I write are all composites—they include some characteristics of real people, both people I know and people I don't. They all include some of me. They include characteristics I've made up, dialogue I've heard on the subway, imagined histories I've concocted while watching someone standing in line at the grocery store. I always take inspiration from real life.

In my first book, *How to Bury Your Brother*, the main character's life circumstances and personality are very different from my own. Lex's personality is much closer to mine.

I loved writing the Margaret sections the most—she cracked me up endlessly. And in another example of finding inspiration in the weirdest places, her character was first sparked by a family story I read on Reddit about a woman who said that getting all of her belongings stolen while backpacking in Paris in the eighties was the best thing that ever happened to her. Margaret might say the same.

**Has your writing process changed at all since your first book? If so, how?**

My writing process has gotten much faster! *How to Bury Your Brother* took me four years to write, while I wrote the majority of

this book in a year. The writing process was much less painful, since I had a better idea of what I was writing before I started. The process also involved a lot more research, since I needed to research Memphis and its history as well as linguistics.

***Learning to Speak Southern*, and your first book, *How to Bury Your Brother*, both deal with the complicated process of grieving someone while learning about the life they truly led. Do you think we ever really know the people around us? Are there some things that we can't know until our loved ones are gone?**

People vary in terms of how open they are, but I do believe it's impossible to know *if* you know someone fully. You can see the picture someone is presenting to the world, and perhaps that picture is 90 percent of the full canvas, or perhaps it's 30 percent. I'm not sure it's possible to know every single facet of a person—even of yourself. Different situations bring out different qualities in people, and we're always changing and evolving.

I've always been interested in how families reorganize themselves after a death, and I'll likely continue to explore that theme in my writing. Death, especially an unexpected death, often erases a person's privacy. Perhaps it's morbid, but I think about this sometimes with my own writings. I'm a dedicated journal keeper (like Margaret). Even someone's diary, though, is just another picture of them—the one they are writing down. Humans are endlessly complex.

**What are you reading these days?**

Like many people, I've been making a large effort to read more diverse voices, especially books written by African Americans.



Some books I read recently and recommend: *My Sister, the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite, *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *Red at the Bone* by Jacqueline Woodson, and *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett.

I've also celebrated the releases of many fellow 2020 debut writers this year and enjoyed reading their books. Some recommendations: *Brontë's Mistress* by Finola Austin, *The Better Liar* by Tanen Jones, *Saving Ruby King* by Catherine Adel West, *No Bad Deed* by Heather Chavez, *Fifty Words for Rain* by Asha Lemmie, and *Age of Consent* by Amanda Brainerd.