



THE
SUMMONING

a novel

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SMITH

Reading Group Guide

1. What was your first impression of Kit's séances? Do you agree with the way she justifies her work, or is she just taking advantage of people?
2. Is working with a medium a good way to find closure, or does it trap you in the past? Which of Kit's clients exemplify your position?
3. How does Kit cope with Zoey's long incapacitation? Is there anything you would do differently in her position?
4. Describe Tony Cabrini. What do you see as his dominant personality trait? How does that trait shape his actions throughout the book?
5. Kit muses that every grief is private, yet the words we use to define it are often the same. Do you agree with her? How can we support other people even if we cannot truly understand their grief?

6. Did you approve of David's methods of investigating Kit? What boundaries should undercover investigators abide by? Do you think those boundaries would have significantly changed the outcome between Kit and David?
7. Kit is uncomfortable with the increasing reality of her medium work. What strategies does she use to try to understand what is happening to her? Is there anything else you would have tried in her position?
8. Kit's acting career is a severe detriment to her financial stability. In her position would you still be auditioning? Where do you think she gets her ability to persevere? Is her determination good for her?
9. How do dating conventions and gender roles disguise David's suspicious behavior in the early stages of his relationship with Kit? How can we make dating more equitable?
10. Compare Kit to Alison Ingalls. Do you think they caught David's attention for similar reasons? What is the biggest difference in the way the relationships played out?
11. Tony threatens to take Kit in for "resisting arrest," and Barbara Ingalls points out that David's status as a detective protects him from the consequences of his affairs. Do you think these corrupt detectives are common? Do you think they would face appropriate consequences if they were caught misusing their power?

12. Do you think all the characters got the ending they deserved? If you could change the outcome for one character, whose fate would you change, and how?

A Conversation with the Author

Where do you usually turn for inspiration? How did you decide to write about a not-so-phony medium?

I'd wanted to write a novel about a medium from the time I was living in England but until now had never quite found a way in. Apart from the work of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, whose films are filled with the shimmer of the uncanny, a sense of an unspoken mystery woven into a character's daily life, two movies in particular had inspired me from early on: *Seance on a Wet Afternoon*, with Kim Stanley and Richard Attenborough, and Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*.

Based on a short story by Daphne du Maurier, *Don't Look Now* is an ingeniously structured psychological thriller. Though a medium features as an important character, what interests me is the way it deals with how the living try to reconcile themselves to the dead. In the case of the couple at the center of the movie, played by Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland, it's the loss of their young daughter that has broken their lives, their marriage, their hearts. In joining her husband in Venice, where Sutherland's character has been commissioned to restore an old church, Christie's character comes to believe that she can reach her daughter in her afterlife. But they are caught in

a tragedy that has been unfolding since the first minutes of the movie.

Kit recalls the film in remembering her initial encounter with Alison Ingalls, the docent at the Met, whose voice is so like Christie's. But what interested me in having a spiritualist—or someone who portrays one—is the relationship between the medium and the client. Persuasion is on one side of the equation, while the desire to believe is on the other. If one truly wants to have faith in reaching the dead, then it's possible to convince them that they actually have—especially if one has a few facts or impressions to hang a séance on. Although there are certain authors who have inspired me over the years, in general I rely more on exploring themes common to many of my books: time and memory, and how past actions can haunt the present, which is something I'll be exploring more explicitly in my next novel.

Most of the characters in the book could be classified as skeptics. Do you believe in the supernatural yourself?

Though I've had no direct experience of "seeing" the dead (other than when my mother appeared in a dream to me around the same time she died, looking forty years younger, which really doesn't count as supernatural), my wife's mother had had several experiences of this nature and took it all in stride. Nothing ever frightened her. When a relative suddenly appeared in her kitchen, she looked up and said, "Oh, you've died, haven't you." A minute or so later the phone rang with the news that he had indeed died. She had a number of similar experiences after that.

If you could visit a medium who was completely legitimate, would you go?

Definitely out of curiosity, though I'm not sure whom I want to contact. Although as I get older I've grown increasingly more aware of, and uncomfortable with, my own mortality, the religion I was raised in stressed life in the here and now, not afterward. And heaven and hell never came into it, so I'm not fearful of falling into the great fiery pit or ascending a stairway to heaven.

But death is the one great mystery common to us all—writers, rock stars, politicians—and no one can state with any certainty exactly *what* is going to happen after we take our last breath. Hamlet calls death, “The undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns.”

Except, of course, in a séance...

Do you prefer heroes or villains as a writer? As a reader?

Villains are always far more interesting. Consider Shakespeare's Richard III: he's a kind of evil incarnate, ordering the murder of children, seducing a widow at her husband's funeral, and so on. Yet we can't take our eyes off him. Likewise with, say, Hannibal Lecter. Or John Milton's Satan, the most interesting character in *Paradise Lost*, even though the competition is stiff, what with God and Adam and Eve. I'll also toss in Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley, who would as soon kill you as look at you, and yet somehow you'd be flattered to be in his company.

And who was it who said the Devil has all the best lines...?

Evil requires style, for style is a means of seduction, and the villain has to work at it as meticulously as an actor prepares for

a role. Dracula is a prime example, with his (very) old-world charm, that cape, and his inescapable magnetism. He can also bite and fly, but he would see those as merely perks of the genre.

What was the most challenging part of writing *The Summoning*? Were there any scenes that were especially fun to write?

The challenging part was in finding a balance between the thriller elements and the supernatural, so it didn't just become another ghost story. I find it's best to work in subtler ways, such as when Kit, in channeling an Irishwoman's daughter, feels the little girl's fingers in her hair. Or when she hears someone playing her daughter's piano in the dark predawn hours. Creepy haunted moments that would make anyone question their own sanity.

The séance scenes were especially satisfying to write. From the atmosphere of the little room with the table and the candle, to the words Kit has so carefully field-tested and worked into a script, to the whole psychology of manipulation: as though she were preparing a scene in a movie—something that comes naturally to this actor. There's the sense that at least Kit *seems* genuine, hopefully leaving the reader wavering between doubt and belief. And then she *becomes* genuine.

Or is she just a very skilled con artist...?

What are you reading these days?

I'm doing research for my next novel, a psychological thriller which shifts between 2009 in New York and 1969 in Los Angeles. So a lot of nonfiction, memoirs and such. I've also been

reading Eve Babitz, one of the most acute and acerbic observers of the Southern Californian culture of the sixties. Though I remember 1969, largely from a New York perspective, Los Angeles had a very different scene. The sixties everywhere, though, weren't as sunny and happy as some have portrayed it. There was a dark side to it that I was quite aware of, even in the so-called Summer of Love in 1967. And then I'll mention Manson and Altamont, and that pretty much wraps the decade up in a shroud.

I found the late Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* fascinating, also pertinent to my next project, as one of my two main characters is a successful true-crime author. I was especially taken by the relation between McNamara and her subject, and how what begins as a routine review of files and police reports and maps becomes an obsession that engulfs her life up until its tragic end. The book is as much about the author as the killer she's hunting (and who was eventually captured not long after her death).

Otherwise, as I really don't read much contemporary fiction, I've been rereading novels that had an impact on me years earlier. I also keep up in reading (and rereading) novels in French.