

# Two little Girls

A NOVEL



“Tense, twisty, and compelling.”

—LISA HALL, bestselling author

Laura Jarratt

# READING GROUP GUIDE



1. Lizzie is forced to make a very difficult decision at the start of this book. Do you think she chooses appropriately? How would you have made this decision?
2. Lizzie and Dan have a seemingly strong marriage that begins to falter as the book progresses. Whose fault do you think this is, and why?
3. Dan and Lizzie both have legal jobs that create questions of morality. Who faces more difficult ethical questions? Do you think it is fair for criminals to be defended even when their lawyers know they are guilty?
4. Compare Dan's and Lizzie's support networks. How do their friends and relationships affect their grief?
5. Dan insists that Lizzie explain the choice she made during the accident to him. Was that, as he claimed, to help Lizzie through her grief, or did he have another motive?
6. Everyone in this book makes mistakes at some point in their lives. Who, if anyone, do you think is ultimately responsible for what happens to Becca?

7. What do you think of Clare Underwood's character? What motivates Clare throughout the book?
8. Why does Lizzie decide not to take Clare to the police? Could you make the same choice in her position?
9. Describe the role of guilt in the book.
10. What do you think is next for the characters? What challenges do you foresee them facing next?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



**Lizzie's final decision about Clare is a controversial one. How do you think about forgiveness? Is it a simply a release of pent-up negative emotions or something more complicated?**

It is controversial, and my husband couldn't believe I'd written it. For me, it's much more complicated than an emotional response. The choice to forgive is an act of will. In this case, it was inevitable for me that Lizzie made that choice because she's so appalled and traumatised still by her decision in the lake to choose one girl over the other. Stella, her counselor, tells her she has to forgive herself, but she can't do that unless she recognises the effects of the whole chain of events on Claire and Lizzie's own part in that. Ultimately, to choose to forgive herself for something that still horrifies her about herself means she has to give somebody else that chance. It is a sheer act of will.

It's not something that comes from within me. My Mama Bear is too fierce, and I'm not Lizzie at all. I think that's why it so shocked my husband—who hasn't actually read the book, as he reads very little—and I don't think this one would be to his taste at all, despite it being dedicated to him as a thank-you for being there through a very difficult time of personal grief. But I do genuinely believe that you choose to forgive rather than it being an emotional response. The key here is to look at what that pent-up hate has done to Claire, and Lizzie sees how easy it would be to become that—so she forgives to save herself from becoming that and to break the cycle. And yes, I absolutely believe that sometimes we have to do that.

**Mental health is addressed throughout the book in a variety of ways. What did you want readers to take away from Lizzie’s amnesia, Portia’s trauma, and Dan’s breakdown?**

Here’s the thing with mental health: I don’t believe in that phrase at all. I’m a biologist originally, and I’ve spent years in education, a large part of that working with children with mental health disorders. If our pancreas stops producing insulin, we don’t expect that to be dealt with via some positive affirmation and a bit of relaxation. The brain is an organ and, like any other in the body, can malfunction. It is susceptible to stress but so are other body organs. I dislike the phrase “mental health” because it leads to victim blaming. We are in the dark ages of our understanding of neuroscience, and I think in twenty years, we’ll realise how foolish we’ve been about neurological illness.

What I want readers to take away from the book is that anyone—absolutely everyone, in fact—has a breaking point. People express that breaking in different ways, and they heal in different ways too. But nobody should think they are immune. My husband is a military veteran, and I’ve worked with children who’ve experienced early trauma. These experiences have real effects on the brain, and those people who still think that you can be strong and power through anything are naïve at best and downright damaging in their ignorance at their worst. And the other thing I want readers to take away is that people recover—it’s not a life sentence. We can break, but we can heal and we can be strong again in a different way, but sometimes more beautiful and evolved because of that.

**What draws you to suspenseful stories as a writer? As a reader?**

Suspense for me as a writer is actually the hardest part and what I battle most with. It’s a part of the story that I have to get right for the reader so that the story lives and breathes for them, but I have to work much harder at it than I do around character and emotion. It’s a way of telling the story that the characters experience, rather than something I set out to do as a genre label. I genuinely rarely set out to write something that fits a suspense genre, but the plots I come up with as the characters evolve demand it.

As a reader, I prefer the slow-burn suspense of writers like Jodi Picoult, where there’s plenty of character development and diversion rather than a machine-gun-like sequence of fast-moving events. I rarely read pure crime fiction. I need the emotional connection with characters to keep reading. If that’s not there, I don’t read on.

**What books are on your bedside table right now?**

I'm a very eclectic reader! At the moment I'm editing, so I've got a little pile waiting for when I finish. I still read YA and children's fiction (and I still like writing it) so I have *Ace of Spades* by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé and *The Forest of Moon and Sword* by Amy Raphael, and then *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart beside the very different *A Taste of Home* by Heidi Swain.

I don't read when I'm actively writing or editing, and then I have big breaks in between where I inhale books for weeks before I start writing again. If I do read at all when writing over a long period, I pick something outside the genre I'm writing in. Otherwise I get too self-critical and can't get past that.