

A person with long dark hair, wearing a dark coat and skirt, is walking away from the viewer down a narrow, wet alleyway. The walls are made of brick and the ground is reflective. The scene is lit with a strong blue and green tint, creating a moody atmosphere. The person is walking towards a bright light at the end of the alley.

"I will read anything Block writes.  
You should too."

—LISA SCOTTOLINE

# WHAT HAPPENED THAT NIGHT

A NOVEL

SANDRA BLOCK

# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Do you think Dahlia was right to take revenge on her attackers? Did you feel bad for any of them? Do you think it helped her in the end?
2. Why do you think Dahlia's relationship with her sister was troubled? Her parents? Were you upset with her parents' reactions to what happened to her?
3. What was the impact of Dahlia's rape, not just on her, but on others? Do you think it had long-ranging effects?
4. Dahlia describes her depression during college in detail. Did you get a feel for what she was going through? Is this something you've had any personal experience with?
5. Could you relate to James and his view on the world? Did his voice ring true to you? Do you have any personal experience with autism?
6. Were you surprised by James's secret? Did it explain his motivation for helping Dahlia?
7. Did you empathize with James and his struggles? Could you see why he did not feel he could follow Dahlia to California?

8. Do you think Dahlia and James will end up together? Why or why not?
9. Did you relate to Dahlia and Eli's friendship? In the end, do you see Eli as a net positive influence on her life, or do his other actions negate that?
10. Did you empathize with Eli at all?
11. Does this book change the way you view the societal problem of sexual violence?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**This may be kind of a funny question, but is the novel based on a true story?**

I'm sure many people may wonder about that, so I'll put it this way. Yes, it is based on a true story—just not *my* true story. Unfortunately, rape and sexual assault are all too common on college campuses. (*The Hunting Ground* is an excellent documentary on this.) Every time I thought my subject matter might become outdated or impertinent, sadly, another story would crop up in the news. And, this doesn't account for the untold number of cases that go unreported. I just felt this was a story that needed to be told.

**Would you say *What Happened That Night* is a feminist book?**

Absolutely, and I don't shy away from that term. It wasn't like I set out to write a feminist manifesto or something, but this idea has been rattling around in my head for some time. And the subject is not original. We've seen revenge stories about rape before but usually scripted by men as the vanquishers (i.e. *Deathwish*) or with women as vehicles for fancifully violent revenge (i.e. *Kill Bill*). I wanted this to be fully a woman's story instead.

**Some might wonder why Dahlia didn't just go to the police as soon as she saw the video. What would you say to that?**

It's a valid question, but I wonder how many people in her shoes would actually do that. Women know the justice system is flawed. From statute of limitations to victim blaming to overly

light sentences for perpetrators, the system not only fails rape victims, but also often retraumatizes them. All Dahlia wants is justice, to put the men “in prison, where they belong,” and feels she must work outside of the system to achieve this. Yet, she still maintains a code of conduct—to avoid physically harming anyone—so she doesn’t lose her humanity in the process.

**So, we’ve established that this is a revenge story. But it’s also a love story, is it not?**

Indeed! In fact, I pitched this as a “revenge-love story.” There’s a yin and yang at play throughout between the destructive force of the rape and her revenge, but also the positive, formative power of the love between her and James.

**Speaking of the love story, let’s move on to James’s character. Obviously, we can all agree that he’s handsome. Is there a reason that he’s half-Japanese? Or that he has Asperger’s? Were these conscious choices?**

In terms of his race, he just came to me that way. That’s how I pictured him from the beginning. But, his identity as a person of color (and mixed ethnicity) also made him feel like an outsider or “other,” which is how Dahlia views herself.

As for the Asperger’s, that aspect came later in the writing. At first, the book was only in Dahlia’s voice. But, this felt too constrictive and “one-note” to me. So, I let James start talking and found his voice to be almost contradictory, with simple, even stilted verbiage and yet a brilliant complexity to his worldview. It made sense then that he had Asperger’s.

**We all know Dahlia’s story right away. But James’s story unfolds more slowly. Was there a reason for this, or for why you gave him that heavy secret to carry?**

On one level, his secret is meant to be a “reveal” within the plotline, but it also informs his motivation to help Dahlia in her mission for justice, beyond just having a crush on her. His desire to get revenge for Dahlia stems from his guilt over not doing the



same for his sister. But in the end, they save each other. They both have wounds, and both need each other to heal them.

**As a reader, there were times that I almost empathized with the rapists and felt bad for what they were going through. Did you feel that way about the characters? Did you draw them that way intentionally?**

That was intentional. First off, Dahlia is not a cold-blooded warrior. She struggles with what she is doing but still feels the need to do it. As she points out, these men are not monsters. They were all in the upper echelon of schooling and now society. The idea that all rapists are sociopaths is not only inaccurate, but also not helpful in solving the issue of sexual violence. This is a societal problem that isn't always black-and-white. People we love can do awful things. That's part of the reason for the final twist at the end, to drive that point home. Heroes can be villains too.

**This story also revolves around the secrets of multiple characters. Would you agree?**

Yes, secrets are an integral part of the book. Dahlia is the only one who is unflinchingly honest about what happened to her. She chooses whether to divulge her past based on the situation but is not ruled by fear of exposure. As Dahlia says, secrets are "like a black hole. They'll suck you up and spit you out." And she's right—Eli and James both hold secrets that nearly tear them apart.

**Depression is a theme woven throughout Dahlia's flashbacks. At one point, she describes life as "quicksand," which she wants to escape. Your descriptions ring very true. Is this something you've personally dealt with?**

I do have depression, and I'm very open about that because I think it's hugely important to remove the stigma of mental illness. Depression colored my college experience, and my roommates were an enormous source of support through that.

As doctors, we see patients with depression all the time. Unfortunately, this is also a case of “physician, heal thyself.” We lose four hundred doctors (one medical school) yearly to suicide. And again, part of the problem is that doctors do not seek help due to the stigma.