



"Prepare to be
enthralled... Atmospheric
and twisty enough to
deliver whiplash."

—Maureen Joyce Connolly,
author of
Little Lovely Things

THE QUIET GIRL

A NOVEL

S. F. KOSA

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. When we first meet Alex, he is heading to apologize to his wife after an argument. Why did you initially believe Mina wasn't responding to Alex's texts? What did you make of their relationship from this initial scene? How would you describe Alex?
2. Provincetown is Mina's writer's hideaway—a perfect escape. If you could choose any place in the world for your own retreat, where would it be? Why do you think Mina is drawn to Provincetown?
3. Describe Layla. What was your initial reaction to Layla and her spotty memory? If you were Esteban, would you have taken the girl in?
4. What do you make of Rose and Scott? How can you describe their overall relationship with Mina?
5. We learn a lot about Mina through her husband, her parents, and her manuscript. How would you describe her? What can you infer about her personality?

6. If you were to write a novel about your own life, what kind of story would it be? How much would you change or embellish?
7. Do you think writing the novel set Mina's revenge in motion? Or did Mina's plan inspire the novel?
8. Why do you think Stefan helps Mina? Do you find him trustworthy? How would you describe his character?
9. Why do you think Mina decides to write her story? Imagine what that process would feel like for her. If you were in her shoes, how would you decide to finally express yourself?
10. What ultimately drives Mina to confront her past? What role does Alex and their marriage play in this story?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

***The Quiet Girl* is a clever and intensely twisty story of revenge and suspense. Where did you get your inspiration?**

The first seeds of this story were planted when I was on Cape Cod in 2018 for a late summer weekend. We had ridden from Boston to Provincetown on the ferry, and we were staying with family in Truro. I was enchanted by the setting, a narrow, hauntingly beautiful curl of land that's only sparsely inhabited in the winter months but full to the brim in the summer. I remember staring out at the ocean when the idea came to me: What if a writer disappeared from this setting... and what if she left a book behind that offered some explanation as to why and how? From there, it was just a matter of the details. And because I am trained as a clinical psychologist, the twists and turns usually involve some sort of psychological injury or condition that affects how some characters view and react to the world.

Talk a bit about Maggie's fugue state. What research went into bringing this complicated disorder to life? How are trauma and fugue linked, both in the story and in real life?

The first time I ever read about what was then called psychogenic

fugue was in my abnormal psychology class in college. I was utterly fascinated by the stories of how some people suddenly walk away from their lives and seem to forget who they are for a time; some even adopt entirely new identities before abruptly recovering. I knew this concept had been a topic in fiction before, and certainly amnesia is a popular trope—it's such a powerful, frightening, universally affecting idea. But as I considered a story that dealt with fugue, I was most interested in *why* my character had experienced it in the first place.

These days, the condition is called dissociative fugue. Some kinds of dissociation are normal and not linked to trauma, like daydreaming. It's a kind of mental disconnection from the world around you. However, the more disabling types of dissociation—where the mind completely walls off the memory of certain experiences—are pretty closely linked with traumatic experiences. This is Maggie's experience in the book: she had been sexually abused for years before she experienced a severe and prolonged fugue state, and it was her realization that her abuser had gotten her pregnant that finally triggered the event.

In this story, Maggie is at first quite intent on recovering memories of what happened when she was “away,” but her psychiatrist, Dr. Schwartz, does *not* focus on memory recovery as part of treatment. Dr. Schwartz even points out that those memories might never be recoverable, and she's much more interested in uncovering and processing the trauma she believes triggered the fugue episode. This is consistent with many models and approaches to treating trauma and dissociative disorders.

It was very important to me to depict not only the condition properly, but also its aftermath, including potential treatment. For

that reason, I asked an experienced colleague of mine who works with adults (my specialty is children and families) to read a draft of the novel and critique it with the goal of achieving a faithful and accurate portrayal that neither romanticized nor minimized fugue for plot convenience. And this is why, just as an example, I did not have Maggie suddenly remember what happened during her fugue, even if it might have been handy for my plot—in real life, memories of what happened during a true fugue episode are usually never recovered.

There's a really fantastic blurring between fact and fiction in *The Quiet Girl*, as readers try to discern the difference between Mina's novel and Mina's real experiences. How did you play with that line? Do you think authors often insert their own experiences into their writing?

The blurred and shifting line between invention and reality is one of the reasons I enjoy reading books in this genre, and it was one of the many enjoyable things about writing *The Quiet Girl*. I loved leaving tiny little clues in the Layla/Maggie story line, especially early on, that might make readers sit forward and wonder if they've hit upon something significant—or remember later and think, *So that's what that was!*

For most differences between Mina's life and the story she wrote, I wanted there to be a reason why she made the choice she did as an author. For example, she had just turned eighteen when she experienced a fugue episode, and it lasted for five months instead of ten weeks, and she actually had the baby instead of having an abortion. She chose to create a character that was a bit of a wish for her past self—the character of Maggie becomes angry and energized rather

than continuing to try to suppress her past as Mina did. She is older and more proactive, more able to function as an adult in this world and make the choices that are ultimately best for her, and, in the end, takes a drastic action that until the very end Mina had only fantasized about. Mina gave her main character more advantages, and arguably less pain, and she wrote the ending she wanted for herself. And although she never gets to experience it, her character lives on in her own hard-won happy ending.

I think writers use their own experiences in different ways within their stories. Sometimes it's a deep understanding of a certain setting, world, or culture. Sometimes it's some life situation or relationship dynamic. For me, I often use my stories as a kind of processing of my own experiences, perceptions, and fascinations, and *The Quiet Girl* is a very particular version of that—no other book I've written veers closer to my real life than this one, which is a strange confession to make, all things considered...

How much do you think Mina changed or embellished her life story when writing her novel?

I think of Maggie and Layla as Mina's understanding of herself as a younger person, only with Mina controlling the history and course of events. In writing that story, Mina was trying to show herself some compassion and even heal by creating a more empowered character than she herself might have been when she was younger. Mina deliberately changed events in the story, not just to obscure details or protect people, but to allow herself to nurture and experiment with different pasts. In the end, of course, weaving that narrative isn't enough for Mina and might even have made that fantasy more real and necessary for her. I think that kind of revenge fantasy is not

abnormal for someone who endured what Mina did, and I wanted to show the different ways it could play out.

Which character did you enjoy writing the most? Which was the most challenging?

I most enjoyed writing Maggie, I think. She's so incredibly raw, like an exposed nerve, but at the same time, her intellect is active and even aggressive. She's not an agreeable, easygoing character, and at times I think she's a bit hard to sympathize with. I enjoyed the challenge of making her not likable but understandable. Only my readers can tell me if I succeeded!

In terms of the most challenging characters to write, it was probably the mothers: Ivy and Rose. I was worried they risked being almost unbelievable in terms of their behavior, and I didn't want them to be caricatures. Social desirability and display can twist people up, and I wanted Ivy and Rose to be examples of how a person can lose sight of doing what's right when there's a possibility they might lose face or status as a result. And sometimes, when that need to protect one's image is deep and internalized, it can drive a person to develop their own alternative narrative or completely deny reality as a form of self-protection.

Was it difficult to keep track of the characters and how they were portrayed in Alex's world and in Mina's novel?

I didn't find it particularly difficult, in drafting, at least. It was in revisions that I'd read something in one of the narratives and nearly have a heart attack because it wasn't consistent...and then realize it was *supposed* to be a difference between the two. My editor, MJ Johnston, was particularly helpful during the revision process

in encouraging me to highlight some of the differences between reality and fiction as Alex tries to understand how the book Mina wrote is linked to what happened to her, both to help readers keep track and to process the unfolding story. In my opinion, that made the story much clearer and more compelling—and probably much more enjoyable for readers!

What does your writing process typically look like?

These days, I usually fall in love with a concept—cult psychology, mass hysteria events, and impostors who can fool some of the most sophisticated among us are my most recent obsessions. With this book, it was dissociative fugue. Typically, I start to read whatever's available on the subject, and I usually get inspired by possibilities, which then morph into story and character ideas. After that, I create a stream-of-consciousness-type document where I begin to outline who the main character is and what might happen in the story—this is where things can easily branch off into creative places I never thought I'd be—which eventually evolves into the actual plot structure with a defined three acts, midpoint climax, etc. That whole process of researching and outlining can take days...or even years. I have several of these rambling documents, and not all of them will become books someday—but many of them have. For those, at some point, anywhere from a few hours to a few years after I originally develop the idea, I begin to write. When I'm really into a story, that part might only take a month or two from start to finish, but it's usually only the tail end of the overall process!

When you're not writing, what are you up to?

I'm a child psychologist who specializes in working with young

children and their families, so some of my time is devoted to that. But when I'm not working or writing, I can be found walking, hiking, or running. I'm a huge fan of covering long distances under my own foot power (no bikes or scooters for me), and I am rarely happier than when I'm outdoors, particularly with my loved ones, enjoying the beauty of the world around me. I also love to travel, and I often get book ideas when I'm in a new place and meeting new people.