



Reading Guide

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Mystery, like any genre, has its conventions. How does Forbes both satisfy those conventions and play with them?
- 2) What human foibles are the most distracting for the characters in the book: ego, lust, ambition, revenge, or . . . ?
- 3) Sam Donovan finds it difficult to cut herself off and not to empathise with those affected by the death of a loved one. Did you relate to her struggle with distance from the victims and their families?
- 4) Sam Donovan believes that justice and retribution compensate for the pain caused by murder. Do you agree with her?
- 5) Donovan thinks, "Having your child die before you must be one of the most terrible things in the world . . . a scar that would never heal which tainted everything and poisoned the future." Kelly Goodhart lost her husband in the tsunami and "couldn't get over it." What roles do healing and scarring play in the novel?
- 6) What part does religion play in the novel? Why does Tartaglia decide that it might be time to go back to church?
- 7) When Donovan visits Gemma's room she notes the books on her shelf — fantasy — and the one on her bedside table — *Wuthering Heights*. What is the significance of Gemma's reading habits?
- 8) One thing that the young victims have in common is being bullied at school. How does being bullied leave children and teens at risk for being preyed on further, as they were by "Tom"? How does being bullied lead to becoming a bully?
- 9) What role do the sisters of Tartaglia and Donovan play in their lives? How are they essential to the story?

- 10) Early in the novel "Tom" is identified (or presumed to be) a psychopath. What evidence is there that this assessment is correct? How does Forbes get inside "Tom's" head?
- 11) How does Forbes make us believe that both Patrick Kennedy (in relation to Steele) and Sean Asher (in relation to Kelly Goodhart) could be "Tom"?
- 12) Kennedy postulates a few aspects of "Tom's" childhood: "Probably he had a domineering, bullying mother at home, bossing him, controlling him, smothering him, forcing him to escape into the fantasy world in his head." And, "I'll put my money on his being an only child." How do these speculations match reality? Is Kennedy also describing himself?
- 13) Tartaglia muses that "The course of a murder investigation rarely ran straight. Even with what looked superficially to be the simplest of cases, there were always ups and downs, twists and turns and, with the more complicated ones, often long periods when nothing seemed to give." Does the same hold true of good novels?
- 14) Cornish is described as "looking unperturbed and immaculate in his dark suit as if the stains of life never touched him." How does this relate to the other characters, or to people you know? Is it possible to remain always "above the fray"?
- 15) One theme of the book is the desire to commit suicide but not to die alone. How does loneliness relate to both of these desires?
- 16) "Tom" in real life is Adam Zaleski, hypnotist and crisis-line volunteer. How is his choice of profession reflected in his other "hobby" of murder?
- 17) What mystery archetypes do the following characters represent: Cornish, Mark Tartaglia, Carolyn Steele, Patrick Kennedy, Fiona Blake, Trevor Clarke, Gary Jones, Nicola Slade, Angel, Father Igazio, and Yvette Dickinson. Have you come across similar characters in other mysteries?