



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

Billie Starr's Book of Sorries

Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *Billie Starr's Book of Sorries*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *Billie Starr's Book of Sorries*, we respectfully suggest that you consider waiting before reviewing this guide.

1. Jenny says she's sorry so often that it's caught the attention of her eight-year-old daughter, Billie Starr, who has started compiling a list of all her mother's apologies. Why do you think Jenny feels the need to apologize for everything? Is this tendency a matter of nature or nurture or both? What do you think Jenny learns from reading the *Book of Sorries* she finds in Billie Starr's bed?
2. How would you characterize Jenny's relationship with her mother, Carla? How does that relationship contrast with her bond with her father? Do you agree with the last few lines of "Ashes," in which Jenny remembers Pete as the only person who ever really loved her? How do you think these very different relationships helped shape Jenny, and how might they have impacted Jenny's relationship with her daughter?
3. Jenny's best friend, Lyd Butz, tries to talk her out of going along with the Black Suits' plan to frame George Shepherd. In your opinion, is Lyd correct in trying to dissuade Jenny from taking part in the scheme? What are Jenny's main motivations for defying Lyd and going through with it? Were you surprised when the Black Suits failed to pay Jenny for her part in the plot?
4. While tipsy on cheap champagne at Bob Butz's family bonding dinner, Jenny considers all the reasons a woman like her might drink too much in the middle of the week, concluding that it all came down to the fact that not only had her adult life proved a disappointment, but also that she'd always been led by the people around her to expect to such an underwhelming fate. Do Jenny's drunken ruminations ring true to you here? Why or why not? How do you think Jenny's justifications for over-drinking would compare to Randall's? What might his list of reasons look like?
5. During Jenny's first day on the job with the campaign, George makes a clumsy attempt to embrace her. Quietly dodging his advance, Jenny contrasts his behavior with that of Bob Butz, clearly favoring that of the former over the latter. Do you see a significant difference between how George and Bob treat her? Did your opinion change over the course of the book? What do Jenny's experiences not just with George and Bob but also with Randall and the officers of the local police department suggest about the role gender plays in the power dynamics of Benson, Indiana, and other small towns like it?

6. Jenny's sense of self-worth is clearly based largely on her beauty. She takes comfort in her reflection, in watching men melt when she smiles at them, in being reminded that even if her life might appear to be at loose ends, she's still a very pretty woman with all the attendant privileges thereof. But one could argue that it's her looks that attract the likes of Randall, Bob Butz, and the Black Suits, not to mention George. In your opinion, is Jenny's beauty more a blessing or a curse? Do you agree with Billie Starr's teacher, Mr. Richardson, that prettiness can sometimes hide inside ugly covers and vice versa? How do you think being the relatively plain child of a beautiful woman has impacted Billie Starr's self-esteem and estimation of her own value?
7. Jenny knows next to nothing about politics when she accepts the position as receptionist for George Shepherd's campaign. What does she learn in her short time with the campaign? How does what she discovers impact her worldview? How does it affect her search for Billie Starr? Do you feel like politics play a pivotal role in your daily life? Why or why not?
8. This book is set in 1991, just prior to the election of Bill Clinton and a few months after the explosive confirmation hearings of Justice Clarence Thomas. Both men faced credible accusations of sexual misconduct, as did Gary Hart, a politician from Colorado whose presidential aspirations were torpedoed in 1987 by press reports detailing alleged extramarital affairs. How do Jenny and George's interactions compare to those high-profile scandals? How might their story have played out differently if it were set in our present day, given the rise of the #MeToo movement and prevalence of social media?
9. While this book primarily concerns itself with the tangible and often tedious trappings of real life, there are touches of magic realism in the story, including the ghost voices at the end that tell Jenny to keep running and the seemingly otherworldly properties of her purple rabbit's foot. Perhaps the most obvious element of magical realism is the Fort Wayne phone booth where Jenny may or may not have had a brief chat with her dead father. Do you think that is actually Pete reaching out to Jenny from beyond the grave? Or is it just a miscommunication? Do you think the hints of the supernatural serve to deepen the story? Why or why not?
10. Jenny, while curious about Christianity, isn't terribly knowledgeable about its practice or dogma. Carla goes so far as to declare herself not "churchy" (page 52) in advance of her barn wedding to Bob Butz. On the other side of the spectrum, the Mummies all take time to pray for Billie Starr's safe return, and Heather, Lyd Butz's girlfriend, has well-defined ideas about the afterlife and God's esoteric approach to housekeeping. Somewhere in the middle is Vi Gregor, whose kneejerk reaction to death is to tell the grieving that their loved one's suffering is finally over and that they're in a better place. What do you think the book's overall message is concerning Christianity and religion in general? Do you agree with that message?
11. One of the novel's main preoccupations seems to be with law enforcement's role in small-town life, and each character seems to have his or her own opinion about the police. Lyd thinks police departments are vehicles of state-sanctioned violence. Ted mentions over coffee with Jenny that cops kill people like him, i.e. Black men. Even Sergeant Till, a police officer himself, is clearly convinced that the Benson police

department is uniquely inept. Given all this, was it a surprise to you when Jenny joins Sergeant Till as a county deputy? Do you agree with Lyd that Jenny's trademark naivete was showing when she chose that line of work? Or do you think she might succeed as a "good apple"? Did your personal experiences with law enforcement in any way color your impressions of men like the Benson police chief, Patrol Officer Chad Leffert, and Sergeant Till?

12. In the novel's final chapter, Jenny considers the legacy of women like Carla who are doomed to be forgotten shortly after they die because of just how little they leave behind. Jenny supposes that she, too, will be forgotten because her contributions to society will be relatively modest. Still, Jenny is hopeful. What do you think is next for her? And for Billie Starr and Randall and baby Pete and Judd and Ruby Pickens? What do you think the book is saying about the so-called "little people" (page 240) who live in flyover country? What is it that makes a person or a life or a place matter in the long run?
13. When you read the last paragraph of the book, how did you react to Jenny's idea that, when it comes to the forces of light and dark, light is the more stubborn of the two?