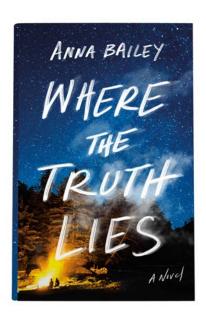


BOOK CLUB KIT



This reading group guide for Where the Truth Lies includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Anna Bailey. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

- 1. Where the Truth Lies is told from multiple perspectives. Was there any narrator whose point of view you found most interesting to be immersed in? Was there a perspective you found it challenging to read?
- 2. All the characters we meet in Whistling Ridge have at least two sides to them and many secrets they keep; in what way does the town itself have two sides, and what secrets does it keep?
- **3.** Friendship and trust are very important elements in the novel; what qualities of friendship does Anna Bailey explore through her characters? Whose friendship do you think is the most supportive and healthy?
- **4.** Do you think it was right for Melissa to keep the secret about Emma's father from her for so long?
- 5. Dolly and Melissa both desperately want to be good mothers, though they are struggling, but their own secrets have some harmful effects on their children. In what ways are Dolly and Melissa's struggles similar and in what ways do they differ? Did you empathize with them?
- 6. At the beginning of the novel, Emma describes the Tall Bones as "a circle of white rocks, about twelve feet tall, etched with generations of teenage graffiti, ice damage, and grooves where moose have rubbed the velvet off their antlers. Nobody knows who put them there. As far as Emma knows, nobody's ever thought to find out. She often wonders how far down they go, how much of them is sitting there buried under the earth. Later she will think, in that respect, that the Tall Bones remind her a little of Abigail" (p. 40). Who or what else in the novel can you compare to the Tall Bones? Why are they such an important symbol in this story?
- 7. Anna Bailey doesn't shy away from the darker elements of small-town life, including poverty, prejudices, and a lack of options and opportunities. Were there any parts

of life in Whistling Ridge that surprised you? Does it align with your experiences or thoughts about small-town life, or does it diverge? How did this influence your reading experience?

- **8.** The adult men in Whistling Ridge don't have many redeeming characteristics. How is toxic masculinity explored through these characters? Do you think there are any positive male role models in the novel?
- **9.** In your opinion, what draws Emma to Hunter? What were your thoughts about Hunter at the beginning of the novel, and did they change by the end of the book?
- 10. Why do you think many residents of Whistling Ridge are so resistant to and prejudiced against outsiders, or people they don't believe belong? How did the negative and aggressive attitudes toward outsiders in this town develop, do you think?
- 11. As the truth begins to emerge and the novel comes to its conclusion, several shocking actions occur. Was there one moment in particular that you found especially surprising or were part of a twist you didn't see coming?
- 12. When Emma begins to drink, and her mother finds out, Emma thinks to herself, "It's not like Emma got drunk to hurt her. It wasn't about her; it was about control. They only control Emma has is over this angry little body of hers, and screwing it up for a while feels like power, the way a mad king might slaughter his people, just to prove he can" (p. 64). What other destructive control tactics do characters employ throughout the novel? Do you think they are as self-aware as Emma and realize their actions are desperate bids for control in their lives?
- **13.** The novel's title can be interpreted in multiple ways: in what way did you read it when you first began the novel and when you finished it?
- **14.** Anna Bailey leaves Abi's fate open to interpretation. Do you think she survived? Is the woman Rat sees Abi, do you think?

Enhance Your Book Club

- 1. Choose another psychological suspense novel set in a small town, like Mindy Mejia's *Everything You Want Me to Be*. Compare and contrast the depiction of small-town life and how the authors portray small, close-knit communities and the secrets they keep.
- 2. Anna Bailey's novel shows the many effects of domestic abuse on family members. As a group, consider finding a local women's shelter and either donate much-needed supplies or volunteer your time there.
- **3.** To learn more about Anna Bailey, request that she visit your book club, and more, find her on **Twitter @AnnaFBailey** or **Instagram @AnnaBaileyWrites**.



A CONVERSATION WITH ANNA BAILEY

Q: If structured differently, your novel could have certainly functioned as more straightforward literary fiction, considering the deep dives into your characters' inner lives and the rich language. What made you want to write your novel in the suspense genre? What draws you to this genre?

AB: Crime novels have a great structure to them, because they start with a question (Who killed X? Why did Y disappear?) and you know by the end you'll have to answer it. It provides this simple but effective framework, and you can pretty much write

whatever you want between that, so long as you answer the question you posed at the beginning—so long as you solve the mystery. I was very drawn to this as a debut novelist; I was always worried I wouldn't be able to finish the book, but knowing there was an end in sight really encouraged me to keep going. It's also a genre that allows you to take your characters and your reader to some pretty dark places, and as a true crime and horror fan, this is where I want to be, fiction-wise. I do love diving deep into characters' lives though—I think characters are the most interesting part of any story—and I would love to write something straight-up literary one day.

Q: Are there any psychological or domestic suspense novels or writers who you read while writing this novel, or who you feel inspired your writing? Is it a genre you read often? What books do you like to read for escape?

AB: I actually hadn't read a lot in this genre before I started writing Where the Truth Lies. I'm a big fan of literary authors like Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout, and Annie Proulx; their work is so character-driven, and that was something I knew I wanted to do with my own writing, but literary fiction felt a bit daunting to me as a debut novelist. I seriously doubted anyone would be that interested in what I had to say. But I was very inspired by Celeste Ng's Everything I Never Told You—I really admired the way she wrote about this family falling apart, centered around a mystery that keeps you turning the pages.



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Nowadays I read a lot more crime fiction, and I'm particularly fond of Jane Harper, Paula Hawkins, and S.J. Watson. I get sent a lot of brilliant proofs as well, and I was really impressed by Norwegian writer Helene Flood's new suspense novel *The Therapist*. When I'm not reading for work, I enjoy queer historical fiction.

Q: When in the drafting process did you know you wanted to write the novel from multiple perspectives? When you started writing the novel, was there any one character in particular whose voice and POV you wanted to explore? How did you plan your plot so that the right character narrated at the right time, in order to reveal—or conceal—information to keep the reader hooked?

AB: I'd written an early draft that was only told from two characters' perspectives, but I found it hard to fit the story into this limited set of POVs. More perspectives gave me more insight into how this town functioned, which was vital because it's really a story about the town as much as it is about Abigail's disappearance. I think I found Emma's POV the most challenging to write, actually, because she's the one investigating what happened to Abigail, and so her storyline required the most plotting—but on top of that, I still wanted her to feel like a fully realized character, and not just a two-dimensional figure to facilitate the plot, so her chapters could certainly be tricky. I like to plot things physically, writing events out on Post-its and moving them around by hand; I feel like that's the easiest way for me to keep track of things (and as my editors can attest, I still manage to forget things).

Q: Was there any character who you were especially drawn to, or whose arc—despite writing it yourself—moved or surprised you?

AB: I really enjoyed writing Dolly. She was the character who launched this whole novel—at university I wrote a short story about a woman whose daughter was missing, and how this affected her relationship with her remaining sons, and it wasn't a very good piece of writing, but that concept stayed with me, and so when I realized I wanted to write a mystery set in the Rockies, it was great to be able to dig up those characters again and put them to use at last. Dolly provided me with a lot of creative freedom (after all, I'm not a fortysomething mother of three with a missing child, so that was already an interesting writing challenge), and she was an



This place may be beautiful, but it is definitely not safe.

outlet for a lot of the complicated feelings I had to work through as a result of my time in the US, which made writing her story very cathartic. Her climactic moment in the novel was originally going to be Noah's, but when the time came, I felt that she deserved this chance to stand up for herself just as much.

Dolly is the only character whose name stayed the same through every draft, so I think she was always the one who was most important to me.

Q: Did the characters come to you first, or did the setting? How important is the mountain west and its small towns to the feel of your novel and the shaping of your characters?

AB: I already had a few ideas for characters (like Dolly and her children), but it was the setting that prompted me to write this particular novel, I think. Coming from a small village in the west of England, Colorado was like nothing I'd ever seen before. The Rockies had a real brutal kind of beauty to them that I instantly fell in love with, but it's not an easy landscape to live in. Despite the huge, seemingly endless mountains, the world can feel very narrow in a place like that, and I often felt trapped in those small towns. It made me think about the different ways a place has of trapping people—maybe you can't leave because of poverty, or family, or drugs—and I wanted to explore the lengths a character might go to in order to escape that situation.

Q: You lived in Colorado for several years, what did you most want to depict about this particular region?

AB: I mostly lived in Texas actually, but Colorado was somewhere I visited a lot before eventually moving there, and I was really drawn in by these vast, powerful landscapes, which I wanted to portray in *Where the Truth Lies*. I think we have a really interesting, primal relationship with wild places; as a species we've grown up on tales not to go into the woods alone, and I really wanted to build on that kind of instinctive fear. The story starts with a girl being practically swallowed up by the forest, because I wanted to say right off the bat that this place may be beautiful, but it is definitely not safe.

Q: Were there any small towns in particular that influenced the setting of Whistling Ridge?

AB: Estes Park, Grand Lake, and Lyons—all in Colorado—were visual inspirations for Whistling Ridge. All the distances between certain locations in the story are even based on real distances between Estes and landmarks in the surrounding area. Red River, New Mexico, was another Rocky Mountain town that inspired me as well. The politics of Whistling Ridge, though, are mainly drawn from the various places I spent time in down in Texas. This being said, I think small towns have plenty in common wherever you go, on whatever continent, and there was probably, subconsciously, a lot from my own British small-town upbringing that made its way into this story too.

Q: What do the Tall Bones represent to you? Why did you decide to include these formations and have them play such a symbolically important part in the plot?

AB: Honestly, I'm just fascinated by stone circles. It's only really in the last few years that I've started traveling—not just outside the UK, but outside of the West Country and Wales; that whole west side of the British Isles is where I've spent most of my life, and it's a place drenched in folklore, full of ancient monuments, and I grew up around all these strange standing stones, reaching out of the landscape. They remind me of home. I was very lonely in America, and so when it came to writing this novel, I wanted to bring a piece of my own upbringing to the story, and have the Tall Bones be a place where the local teenagers felt safe.



So much of writing is about empathy.

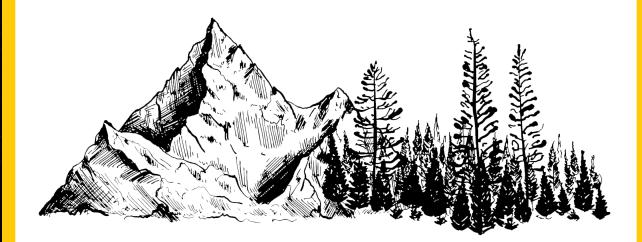
Q: Why did you decide to make Rat from Transylvania? What about that heritage was important to you to include?

AB: There are various narratives about intolerance in this novel, but I wasn't trying to say that America is the only country where these things happen, and Rat's story came about much more as a result of what was going on the UK at the time. Xenophobia is a huge problem in Britain, made worse by Brexit, and Eastern Europeans living in the UK have faced terrible backlash from large swathes of the country. When I lived in the US, Trump had just come to power and anti-immigrant sentiment was rife, so it was easy to marry these two threads together, but what happens to Rat in this book is really aimed at certain British readers more than Americans.

Q: Was it challenging to write from the perspectives of adults, teens, and children? Did any come more naturally or easily to you? Did you have any concerns about having a child narrator in Jude?

AB: So much of writing is about empathy, and I think so long as you can imagine how different people feel, you can write about anybody. With Dolly, for example, I don't know firsthand the grief of imagining that my child might be dead, but I do have my own experiences of grief, and it wasn't hard to take those feelings and transpose them onto the fictional circumstances of the novel. You shouldn't be put off writing certain characters because they're older than you, or a different gender or social background etc., or fiction would be terribly boring.

With Jude, I wrote him as being a teenager in the original draft, so I wasn't thinking about having a child narrator at all, but my agent thought he would work better as a twelve-year-old, so I rewrote parts of the novel to make that fit. I did find that challenging, and my editors made loads of helpful suggestions when it came to getting his voice right, which I really appreciated, because it was sometimes hard to get some distance from being a child myself. I was only twenty-four at the time and being twelve was just half my lifetime ago, so I was remembering it like a young person remembers it, which is to say, I felt like I was a lot more grown up in those days than I actually was!



— THE PLAYLIST —

Put on this playlist curated by the author to set the tone for her book



"Old Time Religion"
Parker Millsap

"Poor Isaac"
The Airborne
Toxic Event

"Muddy Water"
Lucette

"Daddy Lessons"
The Chicks

"Danger and Dread"
Brown Bird

"Lungs"
Townes Van Zandt

"Original Sin"
The Fall Line

"Personal Jesus"
Johnny Cash

"I Think I'll Be Their God" Ryan Culwell

"Bottom of the River"
Delta Rae

"Love Interruption"

Jack White

"Down by the Water"
The Decemberists

"Get What You Give" Mick Flannery

"Guilty Man" Nik Ammar

"Chasing Twisters"

Delta Rae

"Jolene" Radical Face

"Younger Years"
The Milk Carton Kids

"Ain't No Grave"
Crooked Still

"When You Were Young" The Killers

"<mark>American Kids"</mark> Kenny Chesney

— THE CHARACTERS —

Illustrated by Anna Bailey



Noah Blake

Abigail's older brother who works at the local diner, resentful of Abigail being their parents' favorite child.



Rat Lăcustă

A Romanian immigrant living at the local trailer park who stirs up trouble among the conservative community.



Abigail's best friend, who investigates her disappearance and uncovers dangerous secrets about their small town.

Hunter Maddox

Abigail and Emma's drug-dealing classmate whose father owns half the town.



Abigail Blake

A teenage girl who goes missing one night after a party in the woods, but it soon becomes clear she and her family weren't everything they seemed.