

## Simon and Schuster Reading Guide for IN A DARK, DARK WOOD

### Introduction

Mystery novelist Leonora—known as Nora and Lee, depending on whom she's speaking with—lives a solitary but comfortable life in London based around a predictable routine: coffee, run, shower, write, repeat. She's checking email one day when she comes across an invitation to a hen weekend for Clare Cavendish, a friend from childhood whom she hasn't spoken to or seen for a decade. After some urging by a mutual friend, Nora (Lee?) reluctantly decides to go, and finds herself at a mysterious house with a group of near-strangers, deep in the forest far from the city.

Quickly, old rivalries and new relationships bubble to the surface and the weekend turns darkly violent, leaving Nora (Lee?) battered and bruised in a hospital bed. As she struggles to reconstruct the sequence of events that brought her there, secrets emerge about her past and her present that force her to question everything she knows about herself and everyone she's ever loved.

### Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Nora is a mystery writer who lives an extremely predictable, routine lifestyle. As a professional, she is in control of her novels' action, dialogue, setting, and outcome, and in her personal life, she takes utmost care to control her environment, her health, and her social life. Why is it so important for Nora to be in control of everything in her life? How do the events of the novel take that sense of control away from her? How does Nora respond as her mental state and her freedom become increasingly uncontrollable?
2. What techniques does the author use to ratchet up the tension and suspense throughout the novel? Discuss specific moments that were unnerving for you as a reader, and how the author kept you on edge. How did the author use humor to lighten the mood periodically?
3. Nora is called something different by every character she encounters in the novel—she is Nora, Lee, Leo, and Leonora depending on to whom she is speaking. Even her novels are published under a different name: L. N. Shaw. What does Nora's ability to shift identities say about her personality and her motivations? Why is she so adamant that everyone at the hen party call her "Nora"? How do the various iterations of her name represent completely different personalities and histories? Why does Lee stutter, but Nora does not?
4. Structurally, *In a Dark, Dark Wood* shifts from Nora's present experience in the

hospital dealing with memory loss to her recollections of the hen party weekend at the Glass House. How did this shifting structure impact your reading of the novel and your perspective on the various characters? What is gained by switching back and forth between past and present?

5. How does the author foreshadow the events of Saturday night and who is eventually proven responsible for what happens? Did you see the twists coming, or were you surprised by the novel's outcome?
6. Why is running so important to Nora's well-being and her mental state? Why does Nora always feel a need to escape, and what are her fears when she is not able to run?
7. How does the Glass House become a character in the book? How does the author convey its remoteness, and how does the house take on an almost sinister quality over the course of the weekend? What did you think about Flo's story about the house's construction and her aunt's struggle with the villagers?
8. Describe Nora's relationship with James. Is it reasonable to think that her feelings toward him would be what they are after a decade?
9. What explains Flo's extreme loyalty to Clare? Is she simply a weak person looking to latch on to someone more confident and secure, or is there something else at play in their relationship? How are Nora and Flo's relationships with Clare similar? Why does Clare act the way she does, especially toward people like Nora and Flo? What does Clare stand to gain by identifying herself with and buoying up people who are so different from her?
10. To what extent did you find Nora to be a reliable narrator? Identify key moments where you trusted her, and key moments where you doubted her. What techniques does the author use to make Nora seem both reliable and unreliable at various points in the novel?
11. Many of the characters of the novel are actors, and there is a great deal of talk about various plays and shows—Tom met Clare while working in the theater, and Nora and James first encountered each other when Clare fell ill and Nora, the understudy, took on Clare's leading role. The Glass House is referred to numerous times as a stage with an audience of trees beyond its windows. Why is all this talk of actors and performances so significant in the novel? Which characters are performing the most, and why? Which performances did you see through, and which did you believe?
12. What do you think happens to the characters after the novel is over? How do you think what happens at the Glass House will impact each of them in their lives and relationships going forward?

## **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Plan a book club meeting that's also a hen night! Keep things light and festive (unlike the hen party in the book) with fun cocktails and games like "Never Have I Ever."
2. If you're not too superstitious, and if you aren't too scared from the scene in the book, break out your Ouija board and ask some questions about the members of your book club.
3. Bring a copy of your favorite scary story and read it aloud to the group (bonus points if you read it in the dark!).

## **A Conversation with Ruth Ware**

### **1. In a Dark, Dark Wood is your debut novel. How does it feel to have received so much attention months prior to publication?**

Well, amazing, obviously! But also a little weird, in the best kind of way. Seeing my book on a billboard in New York was a bucket-list-type thing, but also a deeply surreal moment. I had to keep reminding myself that, oh, yes, *I wrote that book*. I am mainly just delighted that people seem to find the idea of a murder on a hen night as intriguing as I did when I first sat down to write. The only downside has been that it has been *very* hard to concentrate on what to do next-- the characters from *In a Dark, Dark Wood* are still running around inside my head, just when I need to be thinking about new people!

### **2. Have you always been interested in writing psychological suspense?**

I've always written, but this is the first manuscript I came up with that could be described as a crime thriller, which is kind of strange, really, since I've written in every conceivable other genre, including some absolutely terrible fantasy sci-fi that I wrote as a teenager, and which I am very glad never saw the light of day! But looking back, I think with everything I wrote, even creative writing exercises back at school, I was always looking at suspense and life-or-death moments, so I guess the seeds were there.

### **3. What books or films influenced you while writing this novel?**

I absolutely adore classic crime and read a huge amount as a teen--Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Sherlock Holmes, Josephine Tey, and many more. I didn't totally realize it when I was writing, but I think they definitely influenced the structure of the book. Several readers have pointed out how Christie-ish the setup is, with a finite cast of people in a remote house they can't escape from. I suppose I did know that at some level, hence the reference Nina makes to *And Then There Were None*, but I'm not sure I thought other people would see the links so strongly.

I also read and watched a fair bit of horror--Christopher Pike and Wes Craven-type stuff. I think there are definite influences there, too; the glass house is pretty much lifted from all those films like *Scream* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* where the camera is in the eyes of the killer, circling the house and peering through the windows. I always watched those films shrieking internally, "Why don't they shut the bloody curtains!" I suppose the Glass House was me taking that feeling to its logical conclusion--a house where you actually *can't* shut the curtains, and you're constantly exposed to the eyes of the forest.

**4. Are there any real-life events that inspired the book? Hopefully you haven't been to a hen weekend that was similar to the one in the book!**

Ha--no, thank goodness! It's not remotely autobiographical, except insofar as the way some of the characters act and react are inspired by my own memories of being a child and a teen. I am certainly not brooding over ten-year-old wrongs, but I do have vivid memories of my first day at school and feeling like a fish out of water in a way similar to Nora, and the brutal playground dynamics where you can be in favor one day and a pariah the next. And I still occasionally wake up in the night wincing at stuff I said, or did, or should have done while I was at high school. In my case it's all minor stuff, but I think the wounds you sustain at that age cut very deep and leave scars in a way that experiences later in life don't have the power to do.

**5. Which character do you identify with most, and why?**

I think I identify with all of them, to some degree--I can't write a character without inhabiting them and understanding their motives and actions, even the less sympathetic ones. Nina is the person I'd most like to have a drink with--I think she would be brilliant fun, and she's probably the most representative of my impatient, snappy side. Flo is probably the character I feel most sympathy toward--she's least like me, but she is the only person who's acting out entirely good motives. She doesn't always do the right thing, but she's entirely altruistic. Everyone else is covering his or her own back or being selfish to some degree. Tragically, in terms of my day-to-day life, I think I am probably closest to Melanie at the moment! I've certainly been the person in the bar looking stealthily at my watch while everyone else is drinking, because I need to get back and feed the baby.

**6. There seems to be a recent trend in fiction toward novels that feature violent and sociopathic females. Why do you think we are so drawn to stories that show a darker version of femininity?**

You could see it as wish fulfillment, I guess. We spend so much of our lives swallowing our true feelings and being polite, and doing stuff we don't particularly want to do for fear of being seen as unfriendly or unpleasant, or just downright bitchy. I guess this is Nora at the start of the novel --she absolutely does *not* want to go on the hen weekend, yet she allows herself to be guilt-tripped into it by Flo, appealing to her role as a friend and making her feel ungrateful. Maybe we enjoy reading about women who've gone

beyond giving a damn?

Partly, though, I think it's just that we still take notice and are surprised when a woman is cast in that role. It's kind of the reverse of the Joss Whedon quip about Buffy: "So, why do you write these strong female characters?" "Because you're still asking me that question." We've had decades and decades of men doing horrible things in novels and films. Why is it still noteworthy when a woman is cast in the role of the psychopath?

**7. How did you decide to have Nora's memory loss be so central to the novel? Did you do any research about memory loss and traumatic brain injury?**

I love unreliable narrators, but I felt like I'd read a lot of novels where the narrator is deliberately *choosing* to withhold information, or selecting the story he or she presents. I was interested in doing something where the narrator was kind of unreliable in spite of herself, where she wanted to tell the truth but didn't know what that truth was. Plus, I guess, what more frightening situation is there than to know a crime has been committed, but not be sure of your own role in it?

I did a lot of research into brain injury, although most of it didn't end up in the novel--mainly I just wanted to be sure that the scenario I had constructed was plausible, that someone could respond like that to a traumatic head injury, and how the doctors would proceed in terms of diagnosis and scans. Luckily, I have several medics among my family and friends, so they were able to help me find the information I needed. Ultimately, though, I think Nora's amnesia is mainly a coping mechanism.

**8. What is your writing process like? Did you have the entire book plotted from the start or did it change and take shape as you went along?**

I knew the basic shape--the jumping off point, what motivated the characters, roughly where they would end up. But I didn't know the exact detail of what would happen along the way. I tend to plot fairly loosely (the book I'm working on at the moment has an outline you could fit comfortably on a postcard, although there are more details in my head).

When I'm trying to describe the process to friends, I tend to liken it to a car journey to a place you've never been--you know where you're starting off, and you know roughly where you want to end up, even if in some cases all you have is a point on a map. You might also know a few details about the places you'll take in along the way, but the exact journey and the things you'll see are a surprise. You might be surprised by something traumatic out of the blue--a car accident, a crow bursting out of a thicket and smashing into your windshield. Or you might make a diversion to check out a particularly promising side route. Ultimately, though, you have to get your characters where they are going and not get lost along the way.

**9. Do you ever scare yourself when you're writing? There was one night where I put the book down and then stayed awake for an hour listening for strange noises**

**in my apartment! Do you find it difficult to take your mind out of such a dark place when you're done writing for the day?**

Not at all--it's very cathartic in that respect! I rarely scare myself, I think because I'm in the driving seat and I know what's going to happen. It's a bit like tickling yourself--without that element of suspense of when and where the jolt is going to come, it's just not that scary. I do find myself sharing the moods of my characters, though. If I'm writing a furiously angry scene I have to consciously snap out of it when I shut down the computer, or I find myself growling at my family. I felt completely exhausted writing the sections where Nora is ploughing through the mud and snow up to the house, and had to keep breaking off for coffee and biscuits.

I am always surprised when people tell me they found *In a Dark, Dark Wood* scary, though. I'm a pretty cowardly reader and can't deal with much in the way of violence or sadism, which is why I deliberately didn't write about that. To me, the book is tense, but not terrifying.

**10. What do you think happens to the characters after the end of the book?**

I am not sure! I prefer to let readers make up their own minds. In my own head, I think Nora ends up with Matt, though I'm not sure if it would work out long-term.

**11. What are you working on next?**

Another thriller. This one is about a woman who witnesses a murder on a cruise (or thinks she does), but when she calls security, the victim was never there. I guess having ticked "what if you might have committed a murder but you can't remember?" off my list, my next phobia is "what if you thought you witnessed a murder but no one believed you?" If I run out of middle-of-the-night fears, then I'll really be stuck.

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