

To: "The Best Book Club in the World"

From: proudmamabooklover3@hmail.com

Hello Ladies!

This month we have a salacious story that hits a little close to home.

In a small foothill community (rather *remarkably* like ours), some members of a book club must come to terms with the truth behind a long-ago death. Is their beloved safe haven of a neighborhood perhaps not quite as safe as they want to believe?

Oooooooh . . . I smell *secrets!**

The time: NOW

The place: Your House

All right, ladies, let's begin!

Xoxoxo,

Janine

*Was anyone else hoping for just a few graphic sex scenes?????



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

The Neighbor's Secret Reading Group Guide

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *The Neighbor's Secret* for your book club!

The Cottonwood Book Club is the heart of this story, and I loved trying to capture the feeling of discussing books—and life—with a group of trusted friends. The scenes in which the book club meets were, hands down, the most fun to create. In many ways, the novel is an homage to book clubs and the magic of connecting through our honest reactions to literature.

Enclosed is a discussion guide with (Harriet-approved) questions that highlight some of themes that inspired me to write the book, along with some (Lena and Deb-approved) recipes.

All my best,

Alison

PS. If our schedules align, I would love to virtually drop into your book club discussion and say hello. To see if we can arrange something, visit my website: lalisonheller.com.

1. At a critical moment in the book, Jen considers the “painful impossibility of protecting a child.” What does this phrase mean in the context of the parents and children in the book and their relationships?
2. “Jen did not want to care what her neighbors thought.” What is the role of the opinions of others on Jen’s thoughts and actions in the book? Do you think such focus is helpful or detrimental (or both)?

3. Throughout the book, each of the three main women vigilantly guards secrets. What do they sacrifice by making this choice, and what do they gain?
4. Lena convinces herself that through “self-imposed house arrest” she is paying sufficient penance for past crimes. Do you think there are pathways for justice outside of the legal system? Have the women of Cottonwood succeeded or failed in their attempts to find them?
5. What role does the book club play in the lives of its members? How do the book themes and monthly discussions reflect the community’s concerns? Their values?
6. Throughout the book, Jen struggles with a perceived conflict between protecting Abe and being a “good citizen.” Would you have made different choices than she does? How do you reconcile a parent’s obligations to their child with their obligations to their community?
7. Annie wonders whether Lena’s traumatic past has changed her essential nature. How do Lena’s regrets about the past inform the decisions she makes during the year over which the book takes place?
8. One of Harriet’s questions for the May book club meeting references how, in Greek mythology, prophecies can create “blind spots” for characters trying to avoid their fate. What blind spots does Annie create for herself in regards to Laurel?
9. Many of the characters note that Cottonwood Estates is an exceptionally safe neighborhood, perfect for raising children. What are some of the characters’ individual reactions to the perceived threat of the vandalism? How do the acts of vandalism stress the neighborhood’s myth of safety?

10. Deb self-congratulates readers as being “the gold standard of humanity.” She and Annie are obviously one hundred percent correct that readers are the best people. What are some of the benefits that reading and/or book club discussions have brought to your own life?
11. How do the women in the book relate to the men in their lives? Generally and individually, do the men serve as stabilizing or destabilizing forces?
12. What are the most dangerous aspects of living in Cottonwood? Do you think it’s possible to have an entirely safe community, given human nature?
13. After Jen deliberately breaks a platter, she feels better for an instant but then has “the exhausted realization that no one else was going to clean it up.” How do the women of Cottonwood express their anger? In general, how do you think society expects women to channel their anger and disappointment?
14. The ladies of Cottonwood pay close attention to the quality and quantity of food and drink at their social gatherings. How do the snacks and drinks play a role in establishing community and belonging? How do the offerings support notions of cohesion and individuality?
15. The relationships between mothers and daughters—Annie and Laurel, Lena and Rachel, Janine and Katie—are fraught with unspoken expectations and unasked for sacrifices. How are the dynamics between each pair similar? How are they different?

Recipes from *The Neighbor's Secret*

Lena's Raspberry-Mocha Brownies

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup unsalted butter
- 3/4 cup coconut sugar (Lena uses coconut sugar, but granulated will work, too)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon strong leftover coffee
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup semisweet chocolate chips
- 2 cups fresh raspberries

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line an 8x8" baking pan with greased aluminum foil or parchment paper.
2. Melt the butter, combine with sugar, and mix until smooth.
3. Add in the eggs (one at a time) and mix well. Mix in the coffee and vanilla.
4. In a separate bowl, whisk together flour, cocoa powder, and salt.
5. Combine the butter/egg mixture with the flour mixture. Gently stir in the chocolate chips and 1 cup of the raspberries.
6. Pour the batter into the prepared baking pan.
7. If desired, cover the brownies with the second cup of raspberries.
8. Bake at 350°F for 25–35 minutes. Check at 25 minutes.

9. Remove from the oven and cool completely before slicing into squares.

Lolita Lemondrop*

INGREDIENTS

- 2 fluid ounces vodka*
- 1/2 fluid ounces jalapeño syrup
- 1/2 fluid ounces lemon juice
- 4 fluid ounces ginger beer
- Slice of lemon

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine all ingredients.
2. Shake in a shaker with ice.
3. Serve over ice, and garnish with a slice of lemon.

*For a Lolita Lemondrop mocktail, simply leave out the vodka or replace it with sparkling water.