

Discussion Guide

Big Little Lies by Liane Moriarty



Secrets & Coping with Trauma

Secrets have a lot of power in *Big Little Lies*. Jane keeps her assault a secret, trying to make it mean nothing: *She'd always known that her reaction to that night had been too big, or perhaps too small. She hadn't ever cried. She hadn't told anyone. She'd swallowed it whole and pretended it meant nothing, and therefore it had come to mean everything.* (232)

There are so many ways to cope with trauma. Many victims struggle with their post-trauma reactions, thinking there is a "right way" they should feel or behave.

- Do you think that secrecy gives things more power?
- Why would a survivor choose to keep their experiences secret?
- How did the different characters in *Big Little Lies* cope with their own trauma? Jane? Celeste? Bonnie?

Female Friendships

The book demonstrates the way that female friendships grow and the power they have to be life-changing. Madeline, Celeste, and Jane were there for each other in ways small and large - from Madeline showing up at Jane's door to help her with the family tree assignment to Celeste giving Jane a lapis necklace to help her healing after Jane told Celeste about her assault.

- Did Liane Moriarty's depiction of these friendships resonate with you?
- Did anything surprise you? Disappoint you?

Recognizing Signs of Abuse

It seems that Gwen, Celeste and Perry's babysitter, may have been the only one who suspected the abuse at first:

"That's a nasty bruise!" said Gwen. "What have you done to yourself?" Celeste pulled the sleeve of her silk shirt further down her wrist. "Tennis injury," she said. "My doubles partner and I both went for the same shot." "Ow!" said Gwen. She looked up at Celeste steadily. There was silence for a moment. "Well," said Celeste. "As I said, the boys shouldn't wake --" "It might be time to find another tennis partner," said Gwen. There was a no-nonsense edge to her voice. The one Celeste had heard her use to astonishing effect when the boys were fighting. "Well, it was my fault too," said Celeste. "I bet it wasn't." (273)

- Why do you think Gwen noticed this?
- What impact do you think this conversation had on Celeste, if any?

We later find out that Bonnie, who recognized the domestic violence between Perry and Celeste, experienced domestic violence in her home growing up.

- Do you think people that have experienced abuse are most often the ones to recognize it in others?

Impact of Finances on Victims of Domestic Violence

Access to financial assets can have a significant impact on a survivor's ability to access safety. Financial abuse, which occurs in 99% of domestic violence cases, has the power to keep victims trapped.

Celeste, however, is able to purchase and furnish an apartment while deciding if, when, and how to leave Perry - all without his knowledge. Celeste and Perry's economic status is also, heartbreakingly, mentioned as justification for the abuse: *Perhaps it was even fair. A little violence was a bargain price for a life that would otherwise be just too sickeningly, lavishly, moonlit perfect. So then what the hell was she doing here, secretly planning her escape route like a prisoner? (259)*

- What impact did this financial freedom have on Celeste and her ability to plan for safety?
- How would you imagine this lack of financial freedom might impact a victim of domestic violence planning for safety?
- What role did their wealth have in facilitating his abuse?

Who is a “Proper” Victim of Domestic Violence?

Celeste is depicted as having a picture-perfect life: she is beautiful, wealthy, and educated; her husband is good looking; and she has two beautiful children. Her life is portrayed as aspirational, while also being keenly aware that the abuse she experiences at home is wrong:

Celeste often wondered what the Perry groupies would think if they were to see him doing the things he did. (115)

However, she stops short of identifying as a victim or survivor of domestic violence:

She'd read articles about proper domestic violence victims. That was terrible. That was real. What Perry did didn't count. It was small stuff, which made it all the more humiliating, because it was so...tacky. So childish and trite. (145)

- Why do you think the author chose to tell Celeste's story of domestic violence? Do you think this is realistic?
- How did working with a domestic violence advocate impact the way Celeste thought about Perry's actions? How did it change Celeste's actions? Do you think it's important for a victim or survivor to work with an advocate?

Why Celeste Stayed

Celeste had many resources at her disposal: she had a strong support network of friends; she had access to counseling in her community; she was highly educated; she had a lucrative career and pathway back into the professional world. Despite having all of these resources, it was still incredibly hard for Celeste to leave Perry:

Perhaps she could stay. It was always such a glorious relief when she allowed herself to believe she could stay. (69)

And the unassailable fact that underlay all her indecisiveness was this: She loved Perry. She was still in love with him. (144)

The boys had always been her reason to stay, but now for the first time they were her reason to leave. She'd allowed violence to become a normal part of their life. (414)

- What other conditions impact Celeste's decision-making process?
- What additional barriers might survivors face?

The Ending (spoliers below!)

Did you know who was going to be killed before it happened?

Maybe it was actually an unspoken instant agreement between the four women on the balcony: No woman should pay for the accidental death of that particular man. Maybe it was an involuntary, atavistic response to thousands of years of violence against women. Maybe it was for every rape, every brutal backhanded slap, every other Perry that had come before this one. (456)

- What did you think about the “unspoken instant agreement” that Bonnie, Celeste, Renata, and Madeline entered into?
- Do you agree that Perry’s death and this scene is about something bigger than just him and that it’s about women coming together as a reaction to the long history of violence against women? In what ways do you think historical trauma may have played a role in this scene?
- How did your opinion of Bonnie change by the end of the novel?

Thank you for joining the Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC) in reading *Big Little Lies* during the month of October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month!

ABOUT DVCC: Domestic Violence Crisis Center advocates for individuals who are experiencing abuse in personal relationships. DVCC's multiple services and professional staff help those experiencing any level of domestic violence and assist them in building a safer environment for the well-being of themselves and their families. All victim services are free and confidential and all services offered are multicultural/multilingual. DVCC serves the communities of Stamford, Norwalk, Darien, New Canaan, Weston, Westport, Wilton, and beyond.

These discussion questions were adapted from the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV).

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