

The Garden of Lost Girls

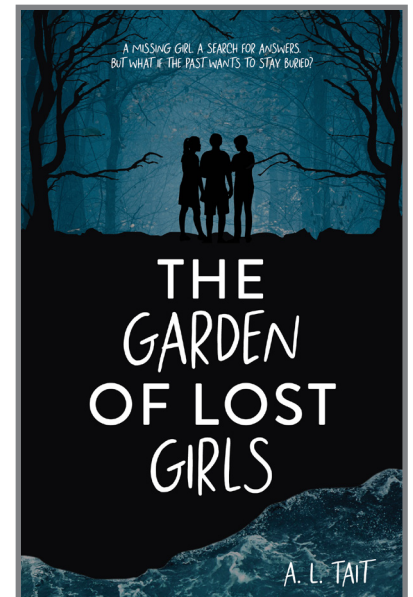
AUTHOR

A.L. TAIT

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary



SYNOPSIS

In a quiet, coastal town, eighteen-year-old Jessica lets out a gasp, then walks out of the opening night her own play, 'The Garden of Lost Girls'. She is never seen again. What did she see? Where did she go? And why did she never come home?

Thirty years later, Jessica's nephew, fourteen-year-old Sam, is still asking the same questions. With the town planning an anniversary performance of 'The Garden of Lost Girls', Jessica's family hopes that it will help to jog memories and, perhaps, finally solve the puzzle of Jessica's disappearance. And Sam's mum wants Sam and his cousins, Gracie and Archie, to be in the production to keep an eye out for new information.

At least, that's the plan. But as the play goes into rehearsal, a series of accidents makes it clear to Sam and his cousins that not everyone is happy about the performance - and they'll do anything to stop it. And when one of them goes missing on the night of the performance, the cousins realise that sometimes history doesn't always stay in the past.

STUDY NOTES

DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

- Before reading the novel, discuss the cover artwork and title as a class. Some things you might wish to include in your discussion could be:
 - Looking at the front cover, what genre do you predict this book is likely to be?
 - Having read the front cover title and text, what do you predict this novel is about?
 - What do you imagine when you read the words 'Garden of Lost Girls'?
 - Who do you predict the main character of this novel is likely to be?
 - What do you expect is likely to happen in this novel?
 - Before reading the novel, write a short story of your own inspired by the title "The Garden of Lost Girls."
 - Having read the back cover of the novel, what, if anything, do you wish to change about your previous predictions?
 - What do you think History doesn't always stay in the past means?
 - What does the back cover tell you about the novel? Compare the text on the back of the book to the artwork on the front cover. How do you think they are related? What do you now know about the characters shown?
 - What emotions do the cover artwork and title engender in the reader? Survey the class and collect descriptive words that outline the different emotions each class member feels that the title and cover inspire.
- At the start of the novel, we are introduced to the main character and learn about where he lives, what he cares

about, and how he fits into his world. As a class, discuss how the author constructs the character of Sam, and integrates this initial character development with the different ways that the overall scene is set. In pairs or small groups, use insights from your class discussion to help you create an overview of the setting - both the physical setting and the historical setting - as well as a character profile for Sam.

- What are the key relationships in Sam's life, and how are we introduced to them? Consider the different ways that various characters are both introduced to the reader and then developed further over the course of the novel.
- The character of Jessica is developed through a combination of historical witness recollections, known past events, Jessica's diary entries, as well as Sam, Gracie, and Archie's growing understanding of what occurred the night Jessica vanished. In small groups, create two character profiles for Jessica. One of how her character has been depicted up to the end of page 249, and one of her character as it is developed from page 250 onwards. Compare the two profiles, and as a class consider how, where, and why they differ from each other.
- Having finished reading the book, discuss the different clues, character quirks, and apparently unimportant facts and features that the reader is presented with over the course of the novel, and how they all culminate into helping create the final resolution of the mystery of Jessica's disappearance. At what point in the narrative did you first suspect each item as being important to the overall plot resolution? How many points did you only realise were important in retrospect?
- As a class, discuss the fact that an author has to ensure that they provide enough information for the reader to fully understand what is happening, without either providing so many details that the reader solves the mystery too soon, or so few details that the reader is left confused even after the denouement. How well do you think A.L Tait strikes this balance? What techniques does she use to help inform the reader without overwhelming them?
- Archie, Sam, and Gracie all have a different perspective on who Jessica was, and her probable actions leading up to her disappearance, than the older members of Jessica's family. Part of this difference is predicated on them not having known and loved Jessica, and part of this difference is based in the fact that the three are teenagers themselves just as Jessica was the night she disappeared, and are thus more able to see clearly how a teenager might behave out of sight of their family. How much do you think that these factors contributed to their questioning of the family narrative of who Jessica was, and how much was the serendipity of finding the diary and photograph? Write a brief analysis of how Sam's understanding of Jessica's behaviour and motivations differs from his mother, grandmother, and aunt's recollections.
- Did Gracie, Archie and Sam solve the mystery of Jessica's disappearance, or did Jessica solve it herself? Write a brief outline of your position on this question, including evidence from the text to support your assertions.
- As a class, discuss why Sam finds it so much harder to forgive Jessica for her continued absence than the rest of his family.
- Jessica's disappearance had a massive impact on her family at the time, and for the next thirty years. Her mother's refusal to leave the family home, her younger sister's marriage breakup, and the next generation growing up with the spectre of her disappearance and ongoing absence were all permanent repercussions. To what extent do you think Jessica's continued absence is based in her fear of Skye's murderers, and to what extent do you see it based in a lack of consideration and empathy for her family?
- What, in your opinion, is the key reason why Jessica was so susceptible to recruitment into a cult?
- Which of Jessica's family members do you think was the most deeply affected by her disappearance and continued absence? Write a brief analysis of the effects of her disappearance on her parents and sisters, and be sure to include evidence from the text to support your assertions.
- Jessica's disappearance was big news in the local community at the time, was never forgotten by her family, and became part of town history because of the nature of where and when she was last seen. In contrast, thousands of people disappear every year in Australia, and many of them garner minimal press attention and are never found. Read the author's note at the end of the novel, and then in pairs or small groups research missing person statistics from your local area since 1996. As a class, discuss the fact that every single person in those statistics is a human story more real than Jessica's. How does this affect your view on the statistics?
- Sam, Archie, and Gracie never once considered that Miss Thorne was a key actor in Jessica's disappearance until she revealed herself to them by kidnapping Gracie. What, in your opinion, are some of the key reasons why they didn't

consider her? What clues existed that would have pointed towards her had they made the connections?

- Some of the key themes in the novel include family, loss, fear, secrecy, and hope. In small groups, create a mind-map linking the different themes that you can identify within the novel, and linking them to various characters and events. Use your mind-map to help you write an analysis of how one of these themes is represented through the characters' actions, and its impact on the reader's understanding of character and events throughout.
- As a class, compare and contrast the representation of hope in the novel, with the common perception of it as a universally positive emotion worth clinging to. Some excerpts from the text to consider when answering include:
 - "'I think,' Sam said,...'that thirty years is long enough to wonder. And I think hope can be exhausting'" (pg 59).
 - "The hope is the hardest thing in so many ways. And the taking away of the hope..." (pg 147).
 - "'She said hope was a dangerous thing,' Sam said, looking at his grandmother" (pg 275).
- Did the novel conclude in the way that you expected it to? As a class, discuss whether the ending surprised you, or whether you saw it coming. Include, in your discussion, your opinions of whether you think it was a satisfying end to the story, or if you think that an alternative ending would have been preferable.