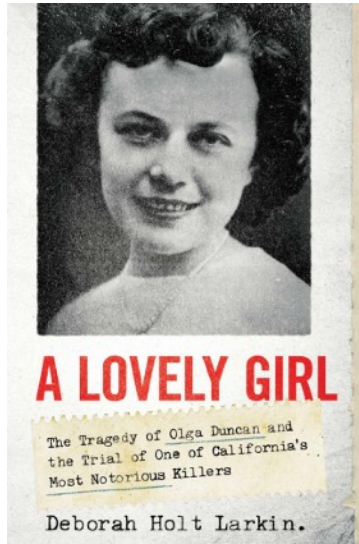


A LOVELY GIRL

By Deborah Holt Larkin

Reading Group Guide



About the Book

The book tells a true story of intrigue, murder, and eccentricity set against the backdrop of iconic 1950s small town California family life. Filled with dark humor and bumbling killers, this sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes comical, and entirely gripping story of a scandalous 1958 murder case alternates chapters of a true crime procedural with a poignant, coming-of-age memoir told in the authentically narrated ten-year-old voice of author Deborah Holt Larkin.

Discussion Guide

1. The book showcases various relationships between parents and their children, some more convoluted than others. While there are many obvious differences between the Duncan and Larkin families, are there any similarities? Specifically between Deborah's relationship with her father, and Elizabeth's connection with her son, Frank?
2. Deborah develops a very personal connection to Olga Duncan (as well as her disappearance and eventual murder) despite never having met her. Why do you think Deborah became so invested in the case?
3. Throughout *A LOVELY GIRL*, the reader sees how Deborah grows up alongside the evolving murder case. How do you think the trial influenced Deborah's upbringing?
4. The story is partially told through Deborah's ten-year-old self who seems to know so much about the world yet so little. How does her version of Olga's disappearance correlate to the real crime story? Is she a reliable narrator? Why or why not?
5. Elizabeth Duncan maintained her innocence until her execution. She was the last woman to meet that fate in California. Do you think Elizabeth believed she was innocent because she was "saving" Frank? Or did her selfishness blind her into thinking what she was doing was right?
6. The treatment of the mentally ill is addressed throughout the book. Deborah's mother works at a mental institution and Deborah visits the children's ward to deliver a doll from the Helpful Club to a nine-year-old girl with childhood schizophrenia. Does the

Larkin family's experiences with mentally ill influence their perception of the Duncan case? In what way?

7. Many characters have differing opinions on the death penalty, which becomes a central point of interest in the story. How did politics influence the trial and subsequent sentences? Do you think the punishment fits the crime? Why or why not?
8. Deborah has a growing fascination with religion growing up, jumping from different sects of Christianity, while also developing an intense fear of sinning. What are the "sins" of each person in the book? Are these sins redeemable? Why or why not?
9. While Elizabeth Duncan was the mastermind behind the death of Olga Duncan, she didn't act alone. Larkin explores the background of the two killers, including Luis Moya and Gus Baldonado, who both come from difficult upbringings and complicated living situations. Can Olga's death be blamed on one person, or are they all to blame?
10. Elizabeth and Frank's relationship was complicated and doesn't seem fully resolved by the end of the story. What do you think the state of their companionship was? Was it romantic as was suspected by the prosecution, or was it simply a mother caring for her son?
11. The romantic relationships seemed to each have their own respective conflicts from Elizabeth creating a rift in her son's relationship with Olga to Bob constantly getting into bickering matches with his wife. What is the author's understanding of romantic versus familial love in relation to the text? Is it really that different?
12. Gustafson calls capital punishment "retribution for a few of the worst killers, the ones he calls 'unsalvageable'... an eye for an eye, a life for a life." Keeping Larkin's exploration into this controversial subject throughout the story in mind, would you agree with that statement? Why or why not?
13. Deborah's father, Bob Holt is at the intersection between the case and her coming of age. How did he bridge the two stories together? What was his purpose in a deeper sense to the story?
14. Much of the story is centered around characters who feel they are either outsiders or are trying hard to fit in. Whether it is as an adolescent trying to fit in with her classmates or integrating back into society after years or imprisonment, who are the outsiders in the story and what are their differences?
15. The story goes back and forth between various settings in California, predominantly in Ventura County. What about the setting is a compelling backdrop for the crime?
16. There are a variety of female characters that are given in-depth examinations, in both good and bad ways. What is compelling about the way the women in *A LOVELY GIRL* are written? What unites them?
17. After the epilogue, Larkin lists the people involved in the case and where they are now. Were any of their outcomes surprising to you?
18. Law vs. order is something that's heavily explored in the trial section of the book especially with the ethical issues brought in with various practices used for exploration of the crime. Where did you see conflict or overlap between these two subjects?

19. What moment in the book was particularly shocking or twisted to you?

Author Bio

Larkin holds a bachelor's degree in American History and Literature from the University of California at Davis, and she studied creative writing at the University of California at San Diego. She has a master's degree in the Education of Exceptional Children from San Francisco State University.

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