

Book Club/Discussion Guide of “Marked by Darkness” by Dawn Merriman

Note from the author:

I’m so honored you’ve chosen my book as your Book Club selection! While writing this book, I often had imaginary conversations with readers about some of the symbolism and themes I wanted to include. (Yes, imaginary conversations are a thing I do. What can I tell you, writers are weird.) Below are some of the questions I pondered about as I wrote. I’ve also included my own comments on the questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Books are simply guides to help the reader “see” a story and create it themselves in their minds. Each individual has their own take on a story and what it means. That’s why book clubs are so fun.

I’d love to hear from you after your discussions. You can e-mail me at DawnMerrimanNewsletter@gmail.com any time. Happy discussing! – *Dawn Merriman*

- 1.** What would you do if you tragically lost your entire family? Would you want to be alone like Maribeth? Would you rather be surrounded by people? What would your plan be?
- 2.** Are Bryson, Lilly and Benny actually ghosts or just hallucinations Maribeth creates?
- 3.** How does unresolved guilt affect the characters and their decisions? How does Maribeth deal with her guilt over her family’s murders? How does Samuels deal with his guilt? How does Grant’s guilt over his wife’s suicide affect his interactions with Maribeth? How can guilt affect your own lives?
- 4.** Maribeth tells Grant at the creek, “No one can truly save someone else.” In what ways is this true or not true?
- 5.** In the same scene, Grant tells Maribeth the worst part of grief is that no one wants to ask about your lost loved one because it might upset you. How has this concept affected your own experiences with grief or the grief of someone close to you?
- 6.** Speaking of Grant and Maribeth’s relationship, Maribeth begins developing feelings for Grant while Bryson is still with her, sort of. Awkward! How might this situation be an issue for you and what are your thoughts on how Maribeth handled it?
- 7.** There are several symbolic animal characters in the book. What do you think each one symbolizes and how did their inclusion shape Maribeth? - Indy – The hunted deer – Jingles the cat – Coyotes – Spider?

- 8.** How do the different approaches to motherhood affect the characters? Maribeth and Nicole’s mother is hundreds of miles away and not involved in their lives. How does this affect the sisters? Victoria gave Jesse away and then tried to “fix” Jacob by telling him he was bad. What ramifications did this have on the boys, if any? Maribeth was a busy working mom who loved her children fiercely. How was her relationship with her kids different than the one she has with her mom? What did that do to Maribeth? How do your own relationships with your mom or children affect you?
- 9.** Victoria says her sons were “born bad,” but they also had non-ideal childhoods. To what extent do you think they were born bad, or did their upbringing shape them? Do you think their twin bond being broken when they were so young contribute to their evil ways? If they are born sociopaths, do they have a choice of good or evil?
- 10.** Maribeth is pushed over the edge after the loss of yet another family, her pigs and chickens. Is her subsequent brutality against Franklin justified? Are we all capable of brutality if pushed too far? If you were in Maribeth’s place during the final battle, would you have let Franklin live or smother him? Would you have killed Jacob the night he killed the family, or let nature take its course for him?
- 11.** The book opens with “Living can be worse than death.” For Maribeth, how was living harder? By leaving Franklin alive and scarred, was that a fitting punishment? Is there a third choice of madness?
- 12.** The last scenes of the book show two sides of Maribeth’s new life. On the one hand, she’s happier and had started letting family and friends into her life. On the other, she’s alone on the porch, singing the song that represents her insanity of the night she battled Franklin. Will she choose the happy life or the madness? Can she have both? Can she truly be okay after all she went through? Is she actually okay or just pretending to be? Do we all pretend to be okay?
- 13.** Would you stay living at the cabin after all that happens or move away? What are the drawbacks and benefits of either?

I hope this book not only entertained you, but gave you some things to think about. It’s been fun answering these questions as well, kind of like being part of your discussion. Please let me know your thoughts, I love to hear from readers. DawnMerrimanNewsletter@gmail.com.

God Bless,

Dawn Merriman

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Dawn Merriman’s responses

Note: There are no right answers. These are just my thoughts, in case you wanted to see them.

1. The premise for this book started with my pondering this exact question. As a country girl who raises pigs and loves the woods, I imagined I would leave the world behind and live off the land with my animals. I often joke that my family better come back to haunt me and keep me company.
2. Honestly, I don’t know. I wrote it so the reader could draw their own conclusions. I did purposefully make each of them represent a different aspect of Maribeth’s personality. Bryson is her rational, adult side. Lilly is her fun side. Benny is her childlike/primal side.
3. Ahh, guilt. A theme I know too well and visit often. (“How Murder Saved my Life” is really heavy with guilt and the destruction it can cause.) Guilt is a dangerous thing, and usually unwarranted. As women, we often burden ourselves with guilt over things we actually have no control over or are not our faults. I think we all struggle with this. I write about it a lot, because I struggle as well.

Maribeth takes guilt to an extreme. She didn’t kill her family, but she feels responsible. She exacts the harshest penalty, and locks herself away in a self-made prison. Her guilt even drives her to the edge of suicide. Not a healthy way to deal.

Samuels more or less ignores his guilt over leaving Maribeth alone for so long. It isn’t until she calls him that he even thinks about it. He works to redeem himself some by getting involved again.

Grant feels he should have done more to help his wife Sarah Jane. He’s drawn to Maribeth in part because he couldn’t help Sarah Jane, so maybe he can help Maribeth. He also hides in his work.

Bottom line is, guilt can destroy you, so you better deal with it.

4. Another tricky question. We can all help each other, but we have to do the work to save ourselves.
5. To get personal for a minute, our very close friends lost their son to a motorcycle accident a few years ago. We loved this young man like our own son. For a while, I was afraid to mention his name his parents in case it would hurt them. I then realized he was not a “tragedy” to avoid mentioning. He was a young man we loved who deserved to be remembered and discussed. The pain never goes away, but we remember his life instead of avoiding his death.
6. I struggled with this point a lot. On the one hand, Bryson is there, so having feelings for Grant seems disrespectful. In reality, of course, Bryson is dead. Can Maribeth really sustain a relationship with a dead man, even if he is a ghost/hallucination? I discussed this a lot with my husband and came to the conclusion that of course Maribeth needs to embrace a chance at a new happiness in her life. I skirted the issue, by having Bryson give his blessing to the new relationship. It was a fun and awkward issue to explore.
7. I love symbolism. There are so many I used in this book, but I’ll focus on the animal ones. *Indy* represents Maribeth’s loyal companion. He also is fiercely protective (he attacks Jacob in the house). He can’t stop his true/instinctual nature when he eats the guts off the porch. All of these traits Maribeth shows at some point. *The hunted deer* is basically on giant symbolic image. When Maribeth hunts him, slits his throat, and dumps him in the woods, he represents the same things the twins did to their victims. Maribeth feels bad about it, though. The

need to stock-pile the meat to feed herself symbolizes her planning to stay in the woods alone. When she no longer needs the deer and leaves him for the coyotes, she sub-consciously is leaving that meat for the “wild animals” because she is becoming more civilized. *Jingles the cat* shows up when there is a need for change for Maribeth. The first night she finds him, she realizes how lonely she is. When he breaks into the house, she decides to order cat food and thereby inviting Grant to the property. When he shows up after the pigs are killed, he more or less asks her “what are you going to do?” *The coyotes* are more subtle. Maribeth hears them when her wild side is waking up. At the end, the eight coyotes hold Samuels back until Maribeth can finish what she needs to do to change herself. There are eight coyotes and eight women killed by the twins. *The spider* is the dark secret that is too horrible to look at. By hiding the spider, she doesn’t have to face that there are actually two killers involved and that she isn’t safe. The spider is also the secret that she killed Jacob that night and that she heard a second killer in her house.

8. Is there any relationship more tricky than mother/daughter? Maribeth and Nicole have to rely on each other, since their mom is distant both geographically and emotionally. She’s not even a character in the book (on purpose). Presumably, their mother did a decent job raising them since they both turned out to be good citizens. Victoria, on the other hand, might have tried her best, but wow, did her boys turn out messed up! I also like that Maribeth creates new “children” for herself with her pigs and chickens. She is a mother at heart, even after losing her kids.

9. Nature or nurture? Another timeless question. I personally think it’s both. If psychopathy is a mental illness you can be born with (I think it is), then the boys didn’t have much chance, without a support system to help them. Yes, they are monsters, but they are also humans. The same way that “normal” people are humans, but a little bit of monster lives inside us all. Jesse and Jacob should have made better choices instead of murdering women, but did they even have the choice to make if they were born psychopaths? Psychology is fascinating.

10. We are all capable of being pushed too far, but just how far is too much is an interesting question. This is a work of fiction, so of course I took it to the extreme, but I think we can all flip to the dark side if pushed. For Maribeth, the brutality was justified. I’m glad she didn’t kill him and hide the body at the end (she almost did, but I couldn’t destroy her completely). As for killing Jacob that night, he was basically dead, she just had to make sure. Of course, that action destroyed her anyway. There are always consequences.

11. The major theme of the book. Death can be easier if you look at it from Maribeth’s point of view of living without her family. The other major theme is “easier isn’t better.” It takes courage to live your best life, to embrace the good and leave the bad behind. Death is a permanent solution to a temporary situation. Maribeth journeys from not caring if she freezes to death to a life that’s beginning to fill with love and people again. But her sanity took some hits in the process.

12. Broken or fixed? I left this ambiguous so the reader could ponder for themselves whether or not Maribeth is actually okay or just pretending to be. All of us have sides of ourselves we share with others and secret sides we hide. Happy or sad, sane or crazy? As humans we’re a mix of all of it.

13. I had a hard time with this one. I mentally wrote several endings for the book. In one, she kills Franklin and grinds the body up, going completely insane in the process. In one version she burns down the cabin. Some versions, she moves in with Nicole and leaves the cabin to the ghosts. I tried to end it somewhere in the middle. My beta team had differing opinions as well. From “No way she’d leave all she worked so hard to build,” to “Who would want to stay where all the bad stuff happened and she’s so miserable.” Reader’s choice on this one.