

*the*

**MOMENT**

**BETWEEN**



**READING GROUP**

**GUIDE**



## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

1. *How did the idea for *The Moment Between* come to you?*

This novel began nearly a decade ago when I was a naive, first-year teacher in a private school. I was barely equipped to handle routine questions pertaining to my subject matter and wholly unprepared to field inquiries when a young woman in our small community ended her own life. Of course, my students were devastated, and they had no template with which to frame the sort of sadness and horror they were suddenly experiencing. Since I didn't know what to say, I let them talk. And slowly it came out that many of my students ardently believed that suicide was an unpardonable sin. They believed that this poor, tormented young woman was beyond forgiveness. For years, this knowledge rattled around in my heart, looking for an escape, a way to explain why I felt the way I did: that there is grace enough, even for this.

Somehow, nine years later these emotions and convictions began to find their way onto paper, and Abigail and Hailey were born. I almost feel like I can't take credit from there on—the story just came together the way it so often magically does.

2. *You chose a complex storytelling method, intertwining three time frames instead of telling the story chronologically. What inspired you to do it this way?*

In order to truly understand who Abigail is and why she feels compelled to do the things she does, readers have to know her on many different levels. The first-person chapter intros give us a chance to get to know her very intimately. Abigail's thoughts and emotions are laid bare in such a way that I

hope readers can find points of connection with her. Then the present-day, third-person POV that leads off each chapter allows us to live Abigail's life as it is happening. I think there is a real immediacy in these sections. And finally, as I was writing, I realized that it's almost impossible to truly understand Abigail without knowing about her past. She is shaped by her childhood and in particular by her relationships with the members of her family.

The weaving of these narratives made perfect sense to me. It never occurred to me to tell the story chronologically because I believe that there is a certain poetry in the way the past, present, and future are inextricably intertwined in all of our lives. I hoped to capture that in the unique telling of this story.

3. *A good portion of the novel is set on a beautiful vineyard in British Columbia. What about this setting appealed to you, and why do you think Abigail is drawn back there at the end of the story?*

When *The Moment Between* was still in its infancy, I knew that wine would play an important role in the storytelling. Originally I set the book in southern Spain, where I had spent a memorable vacation exploring Andalusia. But my writing partner suggested that maybe Abigail didn't have to go quite so far to find what she was looking for. He recommended the Okanagan Valley, and since I had been there many times and was fond of the area, it turned out to be the perfect setting.

BC's Thompson Okanagan is really an unparalleled place. The never-ending lake, the mountains, the orchards and vineyards, the sunshine—it's amazing. I think it's the ideal location for Abigail to find her home, to discover the place where her soul can finally rest. The whole concept of *terroir*, the idea that where you are matters much, definitely plays into Abigail's return to the place that feels like the home she never had.

4. *Abigail's family dynamics play an important part in the story, and you present two very different father figures for her in Lou's and Eli's characters. What was your inspiration for that?*

I have always struggled with the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, and I cringe at the passage in Romans that reads, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” The whole concept of the older son serving the younger, of one child being blessed while the other is left with nothing but scraps, rattles me. The comparison between *The Moment Between* and this biblical story is thin to say the least, but I think the emotions behind it are the same. Abigail feels unloved. And so she finds herself compelled to do things that she would normally never do—out of a feeling of obligation and commitment to her sister but also because she longs for the love and approval of her father.

Eli came into the picture because I deeply cared for the character of Abigail, and I couldn't let her live forever without the love and acceptance of someone who saw her for who she truly was. She needed to experience a relationship that was not shaped by the presence of Hailey. I just adore Eli, and I love what he was able to do for Abigail.

5. *Both Hailey and Melody were devout Catholics, and you've included a lot of Catholic imagery throughout the book. Is that your background?*

I am not Catholic by background, but there is something about the liturgy and beauty of high church that has always appealed to me. I can't help thinking that many churches (including the one I attend) have downplayed and even sanitized the expression of our faith by eliminating the sensual nature of worship. Of course, by *sensual* I don't mean sexy. I mean we've done away with many of the expressions of worship that engage all of our senses—the candles, the incense, the icons, the liturgy. . . . And in their place we've put modern choruses and coffee breaks.

Don't get me wrong, my husband is a pastor and I love our church. But in dreaming up the character of Hailey, I knew that she would never respond to the sort of contemporary, evangelical Christian church that I go to. She needed the tangible and yet almost-mystical reminders of the presence of God that the Catholic church can offer.

6. *Your portrayal of mental illness in this book is so realistic, so tender, yet so heartbreaking. How did you research this?*

First of all, I read every article, journal, and scrap of information that I could find on bipolar disorder. I found it incredibly interesting that even after all this time the disorder is still very much an enigma. Shortly after I finished the manuscript, *Newsweek* printed a cover story on bipolar disorder and I felt that it summarized my own observations: the scope and range of the disorder is sweeping and varied. Hailey represents just one small portion of the spectrum.

Also, although mental illness is not something that I have personally experienced, there are many people in my life who struggle with different forms of psychological, behavioral, or emotional disorders. I'm hardly an expert, but I feel like these sorts of issues are reaching epidemic proportions in our world today. It seems like every family deals with the pain of watching someone they love suffer through depression, ADHD, social anxiety, alcoholism, addiction—you name it. And though we say that these sorts of illnesses are no different from an accepted chronic physical illness, I do think there is still an unfair stigma associated with mental illness.

I suppose that my research for *The Moment Between* was also conducted in the relationships I have with people I love dearly. In loving them and experiencing the ache of helplessness when I realized that there was nothing I could do to fix what was wrong, I learned much about my role as a friend.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *“Abigail Bennett was the definition of unexpected.” Explain. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? How does Abigail change throughout the book? What is the impetus for that change?*
2. *Hailey’s mental illness affects everyone around her. What sort of emotions does Hailey evoke in you? Do you like her or dislike her? Do you have compassion for her or does she frustrate you? Explain.*
3. *How is Abigail shaped by her youth? What role does Lou play in her life? What role does Melody play in her life? What about Hailey?*
4. *Abigail calls herself a “lapsed Catholic.” Why do you think she has allowed her faith to lapse? Hailey, on the other hand, seems to cling to her faith. Why is her belief system so important to her?*
5. *Why is Abigail so driven to atone for her sister’s death? Do you understand her motivations? Why or why not? Why does she blame Tyler? Do you agree with her assessment of Tyler’s guilt?*
6. *Though she doesn’t claim to be a Christian, until she finds herself obsessed with Tyler, Abigail lives an exemplary, by-the-book life. Hailey, on the other hand, is a Christian, but there seems to be a disconnect between Hailey’s faith and her lifestyle choices. What does this seem to say about faith and actions? Do you agree or disagree? Why?*

7. *What does Eli mean when he asks Abigail, “What if your life is an offering poured out in a single glass?” Do you agree or disagree with his assessment of Abigail’s role in Hailey’s death?*
8. *In the final chapter, Abigail says, “If home is where the heart is, my heart has been homeless for a very long time.” And earlier in the book we learn that “her heart existed in many more places than simply the cage behind her arching rib bones.” What does she mean by that? Was there ever a time in your life when you could relate to these statements?*
9. *The symbol of communion is used repeatedly throughout the book in both obvious and subtle ways. Locate several references to the sacrament of communion. What purpose does this symbol serve?*
10. *Throughout history and even today there are many religious groups that consider suicide to be an unpardonable sin. In fact, some churches won’t even allow victims of suicide to be buried in the same cemetery as people who die of natural causes. Do you agree or disagree with this conviction? Why or why not?*
11. *Near the end of the book, Abigail narrates, “Hailey’s death, like her life, is an unfathomable mix of brokenness. And, I think, grace.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree that Hailey’s life is a mix of brokenness and grace? Use specific examples from the book.*
12. *In the final paragraphs of the book, Abigail talks about the irony of snow in the Summerlands. What other ironies can you pick out as you look back over the book? What metaphors stand out to you? What symbols do you find meaningful?*