

Bright and Tender Dark

Joanna Pearson

About the book

Joanna Pearson's literary mystery *Bright and Tender Dark* centers on the brutal murder of nineteen-year-old Karlie Richards in her off-campus apartment at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000. A man has been convicted for the crime and sent to prison, but some think he was falsely accused.

The narrative jumps between 1999 and 2019 and includes multiple perspectives from people who were affected by Karlie's murder and its aftermath. Among the characters are Joy (Karlie's freshman roommate), Jacob (a beloved professor with questionable intentions), Ian (Karlie's townie friend who recently escaped from a religious cult), Sheri (the mother of the convicted killer), and KC (the night manager at the apartment complex where Karlie was murdered). As we read their stories and follow Joy as she puts the pieces together, the truth about what truly happened to Karlie takes shape. *Bright and Tender Dark* explores the complexities of trauma and memory, true crime fandom, evangelism, and the many forms of love.

For discussion

1. *Bright and Tender Dark* begins with several internet posts and a newspaper article about Karlie Richards's death. Why do you think Pearson chose to open the novel this way, and how does it set the tone for the rest of the story?
2. When we first meet Professor Hendrix, we get to see him as both an older and younger man. What were your first impressions of him? Did these change throughout the novel?
3. What did the filming of *Murder Real Estate: The World's Most Haunted Places: The Karlie Richards Story* reveal about the crime, and about true crime enthusiasts?
4. In Joy's son Sean's chapter, we see Joy from another perspective. How did this change your opinions and/or perceptions of her?
5. When Sheri visits her son Toby (the convicted killer) in prison, did your view of what happened to Karlie change at all?
6. Maggie tells Joy's sons Sean and Ethan about the Weeper. What is the significance of this urban legend to the novel? Do you think the man at the open house was actually the Weeper?
7. When Maggie finds Joy outside her home holding a bag of baby clothes, Maggie thinks she hears the Weeper behind her. "A sound of old grievances, a warning. A lonely moan. A vague shape flickering in the bright and tender dark." Why do you think Pearson chose this image for the title of the novel?
8. What did you learn about Karlie from her college essay that opens the 1999 section?
9. What did you think about the series of letters from Karlie's mother? Why do you think they were included?
10. What role does the Gathering, the evangelical group on campus, play in Karlie's life? In Joy's?

11. We learn that Ian is a former member of Bond of Faith, a religious cult in western North Carolina. How does this group compare with the Gathering? Why do you think Pearson included both?
12. Religion and spirituality come up in many ways throughout the novel. How do the different characters deal with their own beliefs and disbeliefs?
13. When you finally realized what truly happened to Karlie, were you surprised?
14. Why do you think Pearson chose to have the young night manager, KC, as opposed to Joy, find the floppy disc in the final scene?
15. *Bright and Tender Dark* ends with a poem by Karlie. What did you learn from this poem? Why do you think Pearson chose to close the novel this way?
16. How did the structure of the novel—a dual timeline and multiple perspectives—affect how you read it? How would it have been different if it had been told chronologically, from only Joy’s point of view?

Recommended reading

I Have Some Questions for You by Rebecca Makkai, *The Incendiaries* by R.O. Kwon, *The Girls* by Emma Cline, *In the Days of Rain* by Rebecca Scott, *Slonim Woods 9* by Daniel Barban Levin, *Say You’re Sorry* by Karen Rose, *Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies* by Arthur Goldwag, *Cultish* by Amanda Montell, *Into the Water* by Paula Hawkins, *In My Dreams I Hold a Knife* by Ashley Winstead, *The Maidens* by Alex Michaelides