

"Ambitious and lyrical" – *Kirkus Reviews*

# SHE'S NOT HOME

*a Novel*

LENA GEORGE

# Book Club Kit



# Author's Note

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I was seventeen when I lost my first friend to a car accident. The same age as Mariana when *She's Not Home* begins. The same age as Mariana's sister Sheena when she lost her life in a car crash on Homecoming night. By the time I turned twenty one, I could no longer count on one hand the high school classmates I'd lost to our town's bucolic winding roads.

At age sixteen, I saw my newly-minted driver's license as a ticket to ultimate freedom. I could now shape my own destiny. At the time, I had no idea how true that was.

I first began writing *She's Not Home* as an exploration of what ifs. What if something had happened to me? My friend had been driving on a stretch of road I drove often, at the same speed I might have driven it. *There but for the grace of God go I...*

My own sister, nearly fourteen years my junior, idolized me in my teen and young adult years. I always felt uncomfortable on this pedestal, unworthy of her adoration. Like Mariana, I was unworldly and insecure. I often spent too much time and attention on people who hurt me, and failed to be a good friend to those who would love and support me forever. In other words, I was a bit more of a Mariana than a Sheena.

But what if she'd lost me? What if a tragedy had set my essence in amber, left the open gash of my absence to haunt her own teenage years?

I put this book on the shelf for a long time after I became a parent. When I returned to it, I saw it in a new light. The story became about so much more than two sisters, one enshrined by death and the other haunted by it. It became about friendship, and how as teenagers our friends can save our lives from dangers our parents never saw. How as parents, our choices are not just our own, and they can shake the bedrock of our dearest friendships.

Most of all, how each and every one of us -- even our tenderfooted children -- is capable of tremendous harm, but also tremendous love, bravery, grief, and healing.

We all shape each others' stories, for better or worse. No amount of effort can fully insulate us from disaster. But if disaster comes, we can try to choose which character we are in the story (I long to be a Tristan or a Gwendolyn). We can choose who we want to bring with us. And we can love those people fiercely, in the best way we know how.

*Lena G.*

# Discussion Questions

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1. Which character did you relate to the most? Why?
2. What does Mariana's future look like to you? Where do you imagine her ending up?
3. We'll never know for sure whether Mariana and Sheryl actually reconcile. How do you feel about this? Are there questions you wish the book had answered?
4. When Mariana and her father have their first real conversation about Sheena's accident, she falters in her resolve to run away. What do you think might have happened if she did stay? Would Mark have become enough of an ally to her to change anything about their family?
5. Sheryl's approach to parenting changes completely after Sheena and Ben's accident, while Debbie's doesn't seem to change at all. Do you attribute this more to their individual temperaments, or to the fact that one child lived and the other did not? What might have been different had their roles been reversed?
6. After Mariana runs away, Cat accuses her of empathizing too little with the Mauro family's trauma stemming from the accident. Do you think this is fair? What strengths and weaknesses do you see in their friendship preceding Mariana's disappearance?
7. When Mark walks into the conflict between Mariana and Sheryl, he must choose whether to defend his teenage child or present a united front with his co-parent. Do you agree with his choices that day, including his interactions with Mariana on the ride to Coffee & Cream?
8. Sheryl has endured an unimaginable trauma, and she has also inflicted trauma on her surviving child. In Mariana's place, would you be able -- or willing -- to forgive her? Why or why not?
9. Mariana's disappearance harms several people close to her. What responsibility do you think she has to make amends for this harm? Does she owe some people more than others?
10. Do you think the Taylor family has a better chance of healing from Sheena's death because Mariana ran away? What other possible outcomes could you imagine?
11. Do you think any of Sheryl's parenting choices following Sheena's death actually helped keep Mariana safe? How much do you think parenting style plays a role in teenagers avoiding the worst risks and outcomes? How much do you attribute to temperament and luck?
12. Friendship plays a key role in this book. Which friendship was your favorite? Which was your least favorite? Why?

# Playlist

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I think a total of four songs get a direct mention in *She's Not Home*, but many more provided a backdrop for my writing of this book. Throughout my life, I've created playlists (or formerly, mix tapes and mix CDs) as time capsules for various moods or phases. A particular song or album can completely transport me to a moment decades in the past. Below I'll share a song from the *She's Not Home* playlist I think captures something about each character.

## **MARIANA: ALONE TOGETHER (FALL OUT BOY)**

This is the kind of music Mariana turns up in the car when she's alone. Her taste in music isn't as "cool" as her friends', but it makes her feel something, especially in that confusing and expansive in-between space that is senior year.

## **SHEENA: REBEL GIRL (BIKINI KILL)**

In her more anthemic moments, Kathleen Hanna gave Sheena a glimpse of who she could be. Who knows where she and her scrappy bandmates would've ended up? Also, Bikini Kill grated on her mother's ears, which was its own delight.

## **SHERYL: PATHS THAT CROSS (PATTI SMITH)**

This is in some ways a soft-tumbled artifact of the music Sheryl and Mark used to listen to. In others, it's a way for her to feel feelings she usually doesn't permit herself.

## **MARK: MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE (THE POLICE)**

Mark, on the other hand, is still listening to the same Police album he was in Sheryl's flashback circa Chapter 21.

## **DEBBIE: WHO'S GONNA RIDE YOUR WILD HORSES (U2)**

Oh, Debbie. My heart breaks for her in this book. All the love in her life seems dangerous in its own way, ready to break her.

## **CAT: CALL IT OFF (TEGAN AND SARA)**

This is pure pre-Mariana's-disappearance Cat: coming into her own, full of yearning, playing it safe with her heart but allowing herself to drop a few cryptic bread crumbs.

## **TRISTAN: CHALKDUST TORTURE [7/10/99, SONY E CENTRE, CAMDEN NJ] (PHISH)**

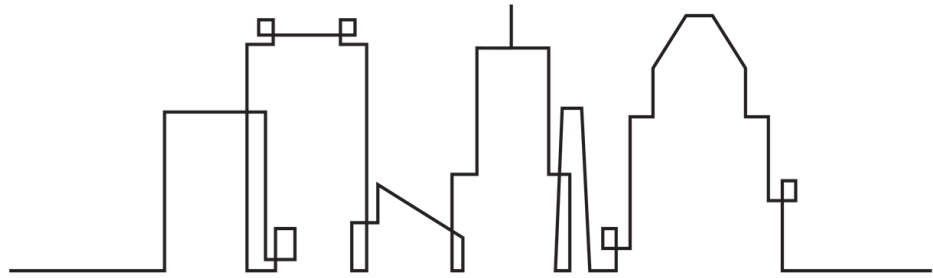
Clearly Tristan would be a Phish fan, but ask him his favorite tune and he'll give you a deep cut from an old bootleg he found online. Plus Chalkdust Torture is just so Tristan.

## **GWENDOLYN: THAT I WOULD BE GOOD (ALANIS MORISSETTE)**

Yeah, G. puts mid-1990s dance hits on during her yoga class, but she also treasures this sweet Alanis track. It captures her spirit, and the strength she lends to Mariana.



Listen to the full playlist here:



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