

What Jonah Knew Readers Guide

1. What is the significance of the novel's title? How does what Jonah knows influence the main characters' beliefs about life and death?
2. Helen and Lucie—both mothers—are deeply shaken by what happens to their sons and want more than anything to protect them and prevent them from suffering. What do they discover in the process of trying?
3. What are some of the limitations that all parents must contend with, no matter how much they love their children and try to keep them safe?
4. As a young mother Helen kept secrets in order to protect herself and her son. How has this affected her emotionally? Do you think she should have told Will the truth about her past after Henry disappeared? Does her relationship to keeping secrets change over the course of the novel? Are there ways in which family secrets have impacted your life?
5. Jonah shows signs of PTSD early in life, and Lucie believes this is due to trauma passed down from family members killed in the Holocaust. Did you accept this as the cause of Jonah's anxiety and night terrors? Have you ever felt echoes of ancestral trauma in your own life?
6. It's well known that a key to healing trauma is talking about it and being believed. How does not being believed affect Jonah? What does it take to make the adults in the novel finally accept what he's telling them? What role does Charlie play?
7. Most of us assume we're shaped by a combination of nature and nurture, yet when asked how acceptance of reincarnation would change the world, Dr. Ian Stevenson told *The New York Times*, "It would lessen the guilt on the part of parents. They wouldn't have as much of a burden that, whatever goes wrong with a child is all their fault, either through genes or mishandling during the child's infancy." When she reads this, Lucie feels great relief. What are your thoughts about Stevenson's statement? Have you—or anyone you know—ever sensed that you've lived before?
8. Of the main characters, Matt, a physician, is skeptical about reincarnation as the most plausible explanation for Jonah's distress. He also questions the credibility of Dr. Skinner's research. What, if anything, changes Matt's mind?

9. Helen and Lucie have one of the more complicated relationships in the book. How well do you think each woman handles her entanglement with the other? Do their feelings toward one another change by the end? If so, how? Can you imagine how you'd react if suddenly your child announced that he or she had another mom?
10. Rosaleen says, "Loss is the price we pay for love." How does this statement manifest in the lives of: Helen? Lucie? Jonah? Mira? Matt? Do any of the characters also make discoveries that help them move on with their lives? If so, what are some of those discoveries?
11. The book's epigraph by physicist Max Planck reads: "Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of the mystery we are trying to solve." Yet in the novel various views of the afterlife are espoused—from Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and research on kids who recall a previous life. What are the different perspectives and what's your take on them? Even if it can never be proved, what do you think happens to us after we die? How, if at all, has the novel impacted your beliefs?