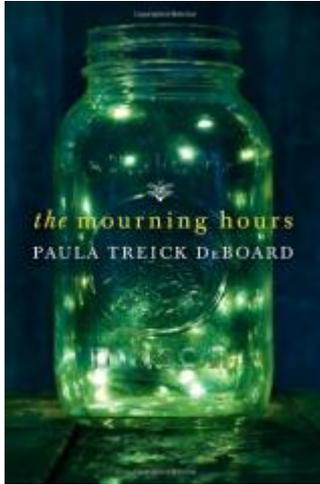


The Mourning Hours

by Paula Treick DeBoard



About the Book

A family's loyalty is put to the ultimate test....

Kirsten Hammarstrom hasn't been home to her tiny corner of rural Wisconsin in years --- not since the mysterious disappearance of a local teenage girl rocked the town and shattered her family. Kirsten was just nine years old when Stacy Lemke went missing, and the last person to see her alive was her boyfriend, Johnny --- the high school wrestling star and Kirsten's older brother. No one knows what to believe --- not even those closest to Johnny --- but the event unhinges the quiet farming community and pins Kirsten's family beneath the crushing weight of suspicion.

Now, years later, a new tragedy forces Kirsten and her siblings to return home, where they must confront the devastating event that shifted the trajectory of their lives. Tautly written and beautifully evocative, *THE MOURNING HOURS* is a gripping portrayal of a family straining against extraordinary pressure, and a powerful tale of loyalty, betrayal and forgiveness.

Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of the novel, Kirsten's father tells her that everything you needed to know...you could learn on a farm. In what ways does this statement prove true—both in the book and in real life?
2. Explaining death to his daughter, Kirsten's father says, "It's just how things go. It's the way things are." Is this appropriate wisdom to share with a nine-year-old girl? Why does this advice make sense for Kirsten? Kirsten references "the life cycle" throughout the novel. What does she mean by this?
3. How does Kirsten's age affect how you read/understand the book? How is it an advantage to the storytelling? In what ways is it a disadvantage?
4. Consider Johnny and Stacy's relationship from their first meeting on the softball diamond to their last, ill-fated night together. What attracted them to each other? Is Johnny's mother right when she says their relationship is too obsessive, or is this just a normal teenage relationship? How would you react if your child was in a similar kind of relationship?
5. The people of Watankee react to Stacy's disappearance by convicting the Hammarstrom family in different ways. Is it surprising that few people come to Johnny's defense? How do you think the small-town culture contributes to people's responses?

6. Family loyalty is a strong theme in the book. Is Kirsten wrong for feeling conflicted over whether her brother is guilty or innocent? If your child or sibling was accused of committing a violent crime, how do you think you would handle it?

7. After the Memorial Day incident, the Hammarstrom family begins to drift apart and eventually disperses to different parts of the country. Only John stays behind on the farm. Do you feel the dissolution of the family could have been prevented? Why do you suppose they fled, and do you feel it was the right thing to do? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

8. At the end of the novel Kirsten puts “an imaginary ear to the ground, listening for the roots of the corn to spread downward,” referring to something her grandfather used to do. What is this a metaphor for?

Author Bio

Paula Treick DeBoard is a reader, writer, drinker of strong coffee and an all-around slave to public education. She wrote her first novel when she was nine years old, in the back seat of an orange 1977 Chevy Caprice station wagon with wood paneling. It was exactly as good as you might expect a novel written by a nine-year-old to be.

In the intervening years, Paula majored in English, taught junior high and high school English, earned an MFA in Fiction Writing from the University of Southern Maine, and discovered a passion for staring at a laptop screen for long hours.

These days, she splits her time between teaching (at the University of California, Merced), chatting about writing whenever she has a chance, and doing the writing itself. Her novels include THE DROWNING GIRLS, THE FRAGILE WORLD and THE MOURNING HOURS.

Her heart --- and her remaining spare time --- belongs to Will and their four-legged brood.

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