

A B O U T T H E B O O K

Mary McGarry Morris's *The Last Secret* tells the harrowing story of Nora Hammond, a woman who appears to be leading the ideal privileged life, including a charming husband, two bright teenage children, high esteem in civic organizations of her New England town, even a presidential commendation for her charity work with abused women. But this comfortable existence shatters when she learns of her husband's longtime affair with her dearest friend—just as the reminder of a sordid incident from her youth returns in the form of a psychopath named Eddie Hawkins. As more and more is revealed about Nora, her family, her past, and the painful truths of her life, she is thrown into an almost paralyzing storm of shame, uncertainty, betrayal, loneliness, and fear.

A tautly told tale of psychological tension and chilling moral complexity, *The Last Secret* accelerates to a shattering conclusion as it explores the irreparable consequences of desperate secrets.

R E A D E R ' S G U I D E

1. Whether it was a revealed secret, a character's behavior, or the consequences of that behavior, what surprised you most while you were reading *The Last Secret*?
2. As the truth unravels, how did your sympathies change? Specifically, how did your feelings change toward Nora, Eddie, Ken, and Robin?
3. Overall, who do you see as being the most honest characters in the novel? Who do you see as having the most power?

4. What role do Sojourn House and, particularly, Alice play in the characterization of Nora?
5. Writer Al Alvarez recently defined depression as “rage turning in on the self.” Do you see this manifested in Nora? If so, when and how?
6. “No matter where she goes, what she does, always an aloneness, that breathless, uncontainable need to flee, her flesh crawling with this same revulsion and panic” (page 54). Why do you think Nora plunges deeper and deeper into this desperate isolation and is essentially left alone by the end of the novel?
7. Did you expect the novel to end as it did? How did this make you feel about Ken and Robin? Is that the ending you wanted?
8. In this more open and confessional age, are you surprised by Nora’s difficulty of discussing her problems, particularly her husband’s infidelity?
9. As part of her increasingly justifiable question of who and what she can trust, Nora comes to doubt her own memory. “Did he say that? Or is she filling in the blanks, sanitizing the story, because the truth is so foul?” (page 123). What do you think trauma does to memory? How much control do you think we have over it?
10. As a continuation of question nine, consider Nora’s reflection: “Secrets, dreamed so many times, the dream is now both defense and barrier” (page 124). What does she mean by that?
11. We learn that Eddie’s instincts to harm women as an assertion of power are pathological (through his reference to the little girl he murdered when he was twelve). Did that alter your reading of him? Does his history make him more despicable, or do you sympathize with the reality that he is certifiably mentally ill? What is the effect of having his perverse motivations somewhat explained?

12. Narcissism is one of the classic traits of a sociopath and certainly applies to Eddie Hawkins. Does narcissism also describe Ken Hammond? Do the two men share similar traits? Why do you think the author gives us Eddie's perspective and voice, but never Ken's?

13. (From Father Grewley, priest:) "We're all hiding something. Every one of us. It's human nature. But if we're at all decent, we're trying to make the best of who we are. Some ways, that's the hardest struggle of all" (page 221). *Nobody* gets off as being pure: not Nora's children, not her dearest friend, not the priest—in the end, not even Lyra. Is this part of the human condition? How do you feel about everybody being so vulnerable?

14. Compare these motivations:

"... his yearning is less for sex than relief from this pressure in his skull, throbbing behind his eyeballs, needing her cries of pain, agony, fear, begging him to stop, to let her go" (page 226).

"She knows they shouldn't hate their father, and yet she wants them to, wants to be all that they have. Selfish as it is, in their pain she finds strength. And solace. And some slight triumph, however thin and cheaply venerated" (page 244).

Discuss the dramatically different ways in which people may find strength in others' pain.

15. "In her anger and desperation is that what she really wanted, the unspoken barter, with her silence, her failure to act, allowing it to happen?" (page 271). In the scene of Robin's beating, Eddie's evil is proved through his actions. Nora's darkness, perhaps, is revealed through her nonaction. Is one worse than the other?

16. Did you think Nora killing Eddie was justified? How would you feel about it had there not been the element of defending the child?

17. Nora asks herself the following questions. Discuss each of them (page 273):

Why did she pay him?

What was she trying to protect?

Why did she stand there doing nothing?

What did she really want to happen?

18. Has Nora lost everything at the novel's end? Or will she have a more valid and meaningful life now that she is free of a cheating husband and dishonest friend? Do you find hope for her or for any of the other characters? If so, where?

19. What is *the last secret*? Is it one that even Nora may never fully understand?