

Reading Group Guide

1. “It had happened again, happened here, just fifteen minutes down the road.” In the novel’s opening scene, Maggie Daley and her daughter, Anna, are stunned when gun violence strikes close to their sleepy rural home — a mass shooting that results in the deaths of four victims, plus the shooter. Shock and surprise that it has “happened here” is a common response of neighbors and victims’ families on news reports in the wake of these tragedies; why do you think this reaction is so common? Do you think Americans’ responses to these events have changed in recent years? Why or why not?
2. Maggie is introduced as “a stickler for language, always looking for the best, the most accurate word.” But this is not simply a character quirk — language plays an important role throughout *If We Had Known*. What are some of the ways that words matter, and that the role of language evolves, over the course of the book?
3. Discuss the mood at the party Anna and her friends attend the night of the shooting. Given what has happened, do you find the teenagers’ reactions understandable? In what ways might they appear unsympathetic? How does Anna’s reaction differ from her classmates’, and why might that be? How do you think you yourself would respond in their shoes?
4. Do you agree with Maggie’s treatment of Nathan in her classroom, vis-à-vis his classmates? Do you think she was too easy on him, or too hard? What, if anything, would you have done differently?
5. Discuss Nathan’s essay and the impression it left on various characters, including Maggie, Luke, Marielle, Suzanne, Robert, and Bill. Why do you think each of them reacted the way they did? Do you think there is a single right answer, or a correct way, for Maggie to have responded?
6. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, Luke Finch is as deeply affected as anyone in the community, but chooses to act on it in a distinctly personal way. Why do you think he reacts the way he does? How do his feelings of guilt and responsibility about Nathan compare to Maggie’s? Should he have agreed to go hunting with Nathan?
7. Consider Suzanne’s role in the novel. Do you find her a sympathetic character? Why or why not? How might this have been a different novel without the inclusion of her scenes?
8. Anna struggled with anxiety and eating disorders throughout her high school years, and once she’s at college, these issues return. Why do you think these problems resurface at this particular moment? How do they affect the choices Anna makes? Do you see Anna’s anxieties as reflective of a greater trend in our culture, or in her generation?
9. Discuss how the relationship between Anna and James develops at college. What is it about James that Anna initially finds so magnetic? Do you think he is a good match for her? Why or why not? Why, ultimately, do you think James tries to hurt Anna in the way he does? Is he motivated primarily by anger, by idealism, by cynicism, or something else?

10. Although the action of the novel belongs primarily to Maggie and Anna, we hear from multiple other characters as the drama unfolds. Why do you think Juska chose to tell the story the way she did, through several characters' perspectives? Do you agree with the choices she made about whom to include, and when?
11. One such perspective is that of Marielle Dugan, the mother of the shooter. Consider how the characters of Marielle and Maggie, both mothers of troubled children, intersect. How does Maggie view Marielle Dugan, and vice versa? In what ways are these women different from each other, and in what ways similar?
12. Multiple plot points revolve around interpretations (and misinterpretations) of written text, from Nathan's essay to Luke's viral Facebook post to newspaper articles online. Why do you think Juska chose to incorporate so many "primary texts" to tell this story? Can you think of other ways in which written words prove dangerous, or powerful, impacting the trajectory of the book?
13. The Internet and social media play a pivotal role throughout the novel, though the various characters—Maggie, Anna, Suzanne, Luke, even Luke's dad—engage with it in very different ways. Do you see those distinctions as generational? What is your relationship to social media, and how do you feel about the way communication has changed in the digital age? Is it a good thing, or a harmful one? Something that can alleviate loneliness by creating connections, or intensify loneliness because those connections feel ephemeral?
14. Ultimately, do you see Maggie as having been negligent? Are the consequences she faces, both professionally and personally, deserved?

Q&A with Elise Juska

This is an uncannily timely novel, in the current social climate, but I understand you have been working on this novel for several years. What inspired you to tackle this particular topic?

I started working on this novel—or a version of this novel—after the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007. I was struck by an interview with one of the shooter's creative writing teachers, who had tried to alert the authorities upon sensing violent material in his work. Her story haunted me. As a writing teacher myself, I had encountered troubling material—of different kinds, to

different degrees—in student writing. Sometimes the response to such material was unambiguous: the student needed help and wanted me to know. Often, though, it was more complicated. A student might reveal a troubling detail inadvertently, seemingly off-handedly. A paper might feel worrying, but not enough to warrant intervening. As a teacher, this was my nightmare: a red flag crosses my desk, I don't react, and something terrible happens. That fear was where the novel began.

Did your approach to the subject matter evolve over the course of the time you were working on it, in reaction to current events?

When I started the novel, shootings were not as horrifically commonplace as they are right now. Over the years I worked on it, the headlines began to feel like a terrible counterpoint to the book I was writing; it made the story feel more urgent, and the process more fraught.

Though ordinarily I would hesitate to pin a novel to an exact month and year, in this case I felt I had to, for the climate around gun violence, and the frequency of shootings, has changed so much in the last ten years. Ultimately, I decided to set the book in the Fall of 2015; this necessitated going back and reworking some of the scenes I'd written years earlier. The most significant changes were to the opening chapters, surrounding the initial reaction of the community. I can recall one line in particular, from the book's first scene, right after Maggie hears about the shooting. The original line read, "Her first thought was: 'This is one of those stories, the kind that seem to crop up every six months or so.'" I changed it to: "'This is one of those stories, the kind you now hear all the time.'" I've made thousands of sentence-level edits to this book (in fact, that line has since been cut entirely) but I distinctly remember making that change, the sad matter-of-factness of deleting the old sentence and replacing it with the new, more true one.

You are a writing teacher yourself. Have you ever found yourself faced with a situation similar to Maggie's? Has your approach to teaching changed in recent years?

When I started teaching at the college level, I was in my early twenties, a grad student. I taught a first-year writing course, not unlike the one Maggie teaches in the novel, in which the emphasis was on writing essays based on personal experience. Looking back, I'm amazed by the papers that crossed my desk, the gravity and intensity of experiences my students were describing. I'm aware, too, of my own inexperience—at teaching and, in many ways, at life—as I tried to navigate the appropriate response. I've been teaching now for over twenty years and am still struck, as Maggie observes in the novel, by how much of teaching is about more than teaching: the unexpected responsibilities that arise when working with students and where those responsibilities begin and end.

In more recent years, I've taught only fiction writing, so my approach to troubling personal material is in many ways simpler (it's fiction) but in some ways more complicated and delicate (it's fiction). Still, I feel an enormous responsibility to my students' work and their well-being, to be aware of students who might need help and register those concerns. In these times, that pressure has certainly intensified. I suspect that many teachers—and perhaps, in a unique way, writing teachers—feel this, too.

The suspenseful twists of *If We Had Known* present a very different kind of storytelling from the sweeping family saga of your acclaimed previous novel, *The Blessings*. How did the act of writing this novel compare to that one?

In some sense, the two books have a very similar intention at their core: to trace the ripple effect of a single tragic event on different characters, through different points of view. In *The Blessings*, it was the death of a member of a large, close-knit family; in *If We Had Known*, it's the aftermath of a shooting in a small town. I originally intended to write *If We Had Known* from only Maggie's point of view, but then the story started expanding, gathering more characters and perspectives—this approach to fiction, looking at an event through the prism of many and varied individuals, is one I find compelling.

In other aspects, though, these novels read very differently. In *The Blessings*, each chapter is told from a different perspective over the span of two decades; here, the storylines are tightly

interwoven over a relatively short period of time. Plot and character are more closely, stressfully entwined. For all the sadness in *The Blessings*, I think it's ultimately kind of a comforting novel because the reader—like the characters—trust in the underlying solidity of this family. In *If We Had Known*, that ground is shaky, the subject unsettling. At different points while writing it, I was reminded of when I was a kid and spent most of my free time typing stories in my room; sometimes I would come barreling downstairs and tell my parents: "I scared myself writing!" I had that same feeling, thirty years later, writing this book.

What do you feel is the most important thing you want your readers to take away from *If We Had Known*, after they've turned the final page?

When I started writing this book, I didn't set out to comment on a timely issue; I didn't come to the story with an argument or an agenda. I was focused on character: a teacher who finds herself in a position I myself had feared. I was interested in the complexities—the difficulty and sometime ambiguity of knowing what to do in such a situation, the shifting nature of vigilance in this anxious age.

In an early chapter, there's a brief mention of Maggie's neighbors, "the old Abbotts," an older couple who have essentially quarantined themselves because the world feels too difficult to bear. Over the course of the novel, various other characters are tempted by a desire for isolation, or retreat briefly into a kind of paralysis. I suppose if there's something I would hope readers take away, it's the characters' ability to ultimately keep moving forward, the persistence of meaningful connections, in spite of their fears.