

ReadingGroupGuide

Once Was Lost by Sara Zarr

ABOUT THE BOOK



After years of covering up for her mother's alcohol abuse, Samara's world disintegrates when her mother wrecks their car and lands in rehab. Sam's father, the pastor of the community's largest church, refuses to tell the congregation the truth, but it is Sam who hides in shame, not knowing who knows and who doesn't. Then the kidnapping of Sam's friend, Jody Shaw, panics the entire community. With an intensive search underway for Jody, Sam is sent to live with friends, for her own protection,

even as her father assumes the role of spokesperson for the Shaw family. While Sam's family, her beliefs, and her friendships unravel, she finds comfort in a new relationship with Jody's older brother, and for the first time in a long time, life returns to a new kind of normal.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. When Sam assumes responsibility for her mother, how does Sam's life change? Why does Sam choose to be responsible for her mom instead of letting her father take care of his wife? What does Sam sacrifice?
2. Why does Sam avoid conversation, even with her best friend, about her mother? After Sam's mother leaves, why does Sam continue to avoid going out with her friends?
3. Sam's father is the pastor of the largest church in town; everyone knows her family. When Sam's mother is placed in rehab for her alcoholism, why doesn't Sam's father tell the church the truth about his wife? Why does this create a problem for Sam? What are the issues between Sam and her dad? How are they intensified by Jody Shaw's kidnapping?
4. On page 43, Sam says, "I don't feel like me anymore." What causes this confusion in her life? How have her parents played a role in Sam's emotional crisis?
5. When Jody Shaw is kidnapped, the entire community reacts. Sam's father becomes the spokesperson for the Shaw family and Sam is sent to live with her best friend Vanessa, while her mother stays in rehab. How does Sam cope with each of these challenges? What are her concerns? Ultimately, how do these events affect the way Sam interacts with her world?
6. As the search for Jody intensifies, Sam's father and Erin spend considerable time together, and Sam is convinced they are having an affair. What "proof" does she have? What does Sam do about it?
7. Sam seems to be intent on revitalizing the garden in their backyard—even though she doesn't know anything about gardening. Why is the garden so important to her? Does she succeed in making the garden grow again? How does she change the garden? More importantly, how does the garden change her?
8. Even though Sam's father has forbidden her to be alone with Nick, she defies him. Why does she feel justified in her disobedience? How does Nick help her begin to find herself?
9. Sam calls and asks Nick to take her to see her mother. Why is it so important to Sam that she see her mom? How does Sam feel after talking to her mother? On Nick and Sam's return trip, why does Sam jump out of Nick's truck?
10. When Sam asks Nick to take her to see her mother, Nick knows it is against his probation. Why is Nick willing to risk jail to take Sam? What does he have to gain? Does he regret his decision?
11. When Nick is arrested, why doesn't Sam tell the police and her friends what really happened instead of simply saying, "Nick didn't do anything.?" Of what or whom is Sam afraid?
12. On page 199, Sam tries to explain "something that happens to her" that enables her to accept her circumstances even though everything is definitely not okay. How would you explain what Sam is trying to express? Why doesn't it matter to Sam at this point that everything in her life has not worked out in her best interest?
13. How does Sam's family plan to change now that her mother has come home from rehab? Will the changes be beneficial for all of them? Why or why not?
14. Since Jody's kidnapping, Sam has matured, experiencing emotions and situations that have forced her to reexamine her beliefs and values. How has she emerged with a stronger sense of who she is as a person?
15. "Amazing Grace" is a well-known Christian hymn written by John Newton in 1779. The line in one of the song's lyrics is, "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see." How does this lyric apply to the story line of the book? How does this lyric apply specifically to Sam?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Zarr was raised in San Francisco, went to high school in Pacifica, California, and now lives with her husband in Salt Lake City, Utah. She is the author of *Sweethearts* and the National Book Award finalist, *Story of a Girl* and can be found on the web at www.sarazarr.com.



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