Book Club Discussion Guide

You Had to Know Winona is a small-town Texas mystery about a woman who runs from her old life and finds herself at the center of a murder. This guide is free to share with any book club, classroom or reading group.

Gina Norris leaves Miami after her husband walks out on her. She drives toward the Texas Panhandle in the dead of winter and slides off an icy overpass in a blizzard. She is saved by a stranger: Winona Harding, the formidable English chairman at Kersey High School. Gina soon learns that in Kersey, Winona is someone people either fear or respect, and she stays to find out why.

How to use this guide: the questions are grouped by theme, not by chapter. They contain spoilers, so save them until everyone has finished the book. Pick five or six that interest your group rather than trying to cover them all.

Icebreakers

Start with one of these quick, spoiler-free openers while everyone settles in.

- **Snowbound:** Gina is stranded in a blizzard with a car phone and no signal. What three things would you want in your car?
- **Fresh start:** If you could move anywhere for a year to start over, where would you go?
- **The teacher you remember:** Like Winona, some teachers are feared and some are beloved. Who is the teacher you still think about, and why?
- **First impressions:** Which character did you like on sight, and which did you distrust from the start?
- **One word:** Describe Winona Harding in a single word. Go around the room and compare.

The mystery

Spoilers ahead.

1. The title comes from a line several characters repeat: "You'd have to know Winona to understand." By the end, do you feel you knew her? Was she a villain, a victim, or both?
2. Winona saves Gina's life on the first page, yet nearly everyone in Kersey has a reason to resent her. How did your view of her change from the hospital scene to Eleanor's eulogy at the funeral?
3. Gina's suspect list grows quickly: Beth Eggart, Wendell Pippin, Joe Poole, Eleanor, Miranda and Wyn. Who did you suspect, and when did you change your mind?
4. Joe's crumpled letters beginning "Dear Winona" make him look guilty, then clear him. Which red herrings worked best on you?
5. Gina suspects Wyn early, then decides she misjudged a "good, caring cop." Why do you think Leila had Gina doubt her own instincts before proving them right?
6. The case turns on small details: a lost heel cap, horseshoe-shaped prints, a dress with no coffee stains, and Tim's car parked at school. Did you catch any of these clues before Gina did?
7. Miranda saw the murder and stayed silent to protect her scholarship. Do you understand her choice? How should the town judge her?

8. Wyn's motive is the Harding fortune, but beneath it lies a lifetime of being an unacknowledged son and brother. Did learning he was Winona's half-brother change how you saw the crime?

9. Wyn tells Gina that seeing her in Winona's office, "so superior and beautiful," is when "the idea took hold." How much did Gina's arrival set events in motion?

10. Wyn takes his own life instead of standing trial. How did you feel about that ending for him, and for his mother, Elana?

Gina's fresh start

1. Gina leaves Miami the morning after her parents' New Year's Eve party and drives toward a place she has only read about. Have you ever run toward something new mainly to get away from something old?

2. Stranded in the snow, Gina blames Sam for putting her in that ditch. How does the blizzard set the tone for the rest of her journey?

3. Gina tells Eleanor she doesn't think she could ever trust another man again. How does that vow shape the way she reads Wyn, Joe and the other men in Kersey?

4. Gina had believed she and Sam failed because they couldn't have a child. Wyn's offhand line, "Not if I loved my wife," makes her realize Sam had never truly loved her. Why does this painful truth set her free rather than break her?

5. Gina is drawn to Wyn even while she suspects him. What do you make of her feelings for him, and of the fact that her instincts about him were right?

6. Gina's red Mercedes and diamond ring stand out in Kersey. How do money and appearances affect the way the town treats her, and the way Winona sees her?

7. Teaching Winona's English students and stepping into Beth Eggart's classroom gives Gina a purpose. What does she give Kersey, and what does Kersey give her?

8. In the final chapter, Gina starts graduate school at SMU in Dallas and meets Daniel Whitfield. Why do you think Leila ended with a new beginning rather than a romance wrapped up with a bow?

9. The book closes with "for once, wanting to didn't mean being afraid." What has Gina learned about grief, grit and trust by the last page?

Kersey and its people

1. Kersey is a town where everyone knows everyone's business, and gossip travels faster than the snowplows. How does small-town life help Gina solve the murder, and how does it get in her way?

2. Eleanor Walsh rents Gina a garage apartment and becomes her closest friend. What does Eleanor see in Winona that others don't? How did you feel when she was named the new trustee of the Harding Trust?

3. Beth Eggart loses her job over Winona's accusation without a proper hearing. Was Winona right to act as she did? What does Beth's story say about power in a small town?

4. Miranda Lamb is desperate to climb out of poverty, and the town expects little from "the Lambs." How does class shape the way people in Kersey see her? Did her scholarship to the University of Texas in the final chapter feel deserved?
5. Joe Poole and Eleanor end the book side by side. What does their quiet story add to a book about betrayal and murder?
6. Elana Stewart lives with a secret about her son's birth for decades. How does her story echo the themes of shame and reputation that run through the book?
7. Leila wrote this novel in the 1980s and early 1990s, with car phones, typewriters and no internet. How would the mystery play out differently today?
8. The Panhandle itself — blizzards, open pastures, the Rocking H — is almost a character. How does the setting compare with the Texas of Leila's other novels, such as *Roses* or *Tumbleweeds*?

Beyond the Book

Fun activities

- **Host a Kersey whodunit.** Before the meeting, assign each member a character: Gina, Wyn, Eleanor, Joe, Miranda, Beth, Elana. Each person comes ready to answer one question in character: "Where were you on Friday afternoon?" The group votes on who sounds most suspicious.
- **Build a suspect board.** On a poster or cork board, pin the name of every suspect with red yarn connecting motives, clues and alibis. Vote on who seemed most guilty at the halfway point, then reveal how many people guessed right.
- **Write a "Dear Winona" letter.** Like Joe's crumpled drafts, each member writes a few lines to Winona: what they would thank her for, or what they would never forgive. Read a few aloud.
- **Cast the movie.** Leila dreamed of seeing her novels on screen. Who should play Gina, Wyn, Winona and Eleanor? Each member nominates one actor, and the group votes.
- **Read the letters at the front of the book.** Melanie Ross Mills and Janice Thomson each tell how this lost manuscript reached readers. How did knowing its history change the way you read the novel?

A Panhandle supper

- **Eleanor's kitchen table:** a pot of Texas chili with cornbread.
- **Elana's sourdough:** a warm loaf with butter, like the bread she bakes for the Rocking H ranch hands.
- **To drink:** strong coffee poured from a pot, never a thermos, plus sweet tea.
- **For dessert:** pecan pie or Texas sheet cake.

Set the scene

- Dim the lights, light candles and play a crackling-fire or winter-wind video in the background.
- Wear cowboy boots and flannel, or your best Miami sparkle, Gina-style.

- Set out an old typewriter or a stack of composition books as decor, a nod to Joe's letters and Winona's English classroom.

Quick trivia (answers at the bottom)

1. What color is Gina's Mercedes?
2. What subject does Winona chair at Kersey High School?
3. What is the name of the Harding family ranch?
4. What was used to poison Winona?
5. Which small object left behind in Gina's classroom helps crack the case?
6. What is the name of Joe's dog?
7. Which university accepts Gina for graduate school?

Answers: 1. Red. 2. English. 3. The Rocking H. 4. Cyanide in coffee. 5. Miranda's heel cap. 6. Max. 7. Southern Methodist University (SMU).

If you enjoyed this book, you might enjoy another Meacham novel:

Early Romance Novels (Walker Publishing, 1980s)

- ***Ryan's Hand*** (1984): A Boston woman inherits a share of a West Texas ranch from her late friend Ryan, only to clash with his forceful older brother, Jeth.
- ***Crowning Design*** (1984): A Denver architect who walked away from a loveless engagement falls for a developer client who is hiding a secret that could destroy them both.
- ***Aly's House***: An Oklahoma horse breeder faces the man she has loved since childhood, now a Wall Street success who has come home vowing to bring down her family.

Major Novels (Hachette Publishing)

- ***Roses*** (2010): An epic spanning the 20th century in the East Texas town of Howbutker, where three founding families, the Tolivers, Warwicks and DuMonts, are bound together by love, ambition and buried secrets.
- ***Tumbleweeds*** (2012): Three orphans, Cathy, John and Trey, form a lifelong bond in the football-mad Panhandle town of Kersey, Texas, until tragedy tears them apart and brings them back together at forty.
- ***Somerset*** (2013): The prequel to *Roses*, following Silas Toliver and four generations of his family as they carve out a cotton empire across seventy years.
- ***Titans*** (2016): A sweeping Texas saga that begins in 1880, when a young mother's decision to give up her child sets two families on a collision course.
- ***Dragonfly*** (2019): During World War II, five young Americans chosen for their language skills are trained as spies and sent into occupied Paris.

Posthumous (Harper Collins)

- ***April Storm*** (2024): Published after her death, a suspense novel about a Colorado doctor's wife with a seemingly perfect life who comes to realize someone wants to take her husband, and her life.

Posthumous (Independent)

- ***You Had to Know Winona*** (2026): Published after her death, a murder mystery novel about a woman heading to the Texas panhandle to escape a recent divorce, only to find a murder soon after.

*** Fun Fact: *You Had to Know Winona* is also set in Kersey, Texas, the same Panhandle town as *Tumbleweeds*. She had created Kersey long before she wrote Tumbleweeds. ***