

THE GIRL IN THE RED COAT

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Reading Group Guide

1. In the beginning of the novel, Beth briefly loses Carmel in a maze. What is the significance of this moment? How did it influence your reaction to the scenes at the festival?
2. Beth tells Carmel that, regardless of what happens, Carmel must stay uniquely “Carmel” inside. Are names an important aspect of this story? Can you think of any examples where names play a significant role in the text?
3. Families, or, more importantly, family difficulties, are central to *The Girl in the Red Coat*. What are the various family dynamics at work? Where are there parallels and where are there inconsistencies?
4. Discuss Beth and her ex-husband’s shifting relationship. Consider how it is strengthened and changed by Carmel’s disappearance. As Beth says, “we were brother and sister united in this strange bond.”
5. Early in the book, Carmel’s teacher, Mrs. Buckfast, refers to Beth as “yet another single mother.” Think about the friendships Beth has with her female friends and how they support each other. Are those relationships surprising in any way? How do they evolve?

6. Fairy tales play an important role throughout *The Girl in the Red Coat*. Discuss the fairy tale imagery (the woods, the significance of Carmel's red coat) and how it elevates the novel into the realm of the supernatural. Did this affect your reading of the story?

7. How does Beth handle the loss of her daughter over the course of the novel? Did you notice examples of "tiny actions" that helped her cope? How do those actions compare to the more major developments in Carmel's disappearance?

8. Gramps believes Carmel possesses a divine gift. Do you see evidence of this divine gift throughout the text? Are you convinced by it? Look closely at pages 225–227.

9. Gramps and Dorothy tell Carmel a number of lies in order to keep her with them. These lies escalate as Carmel becomes more and more suspicious. What are some of these lies and how do they affect Carmel? Is there one that feels like the breaking point, or is it more a matter of accumulation?

10. The word "courage" is a refrain throughout the novel. Discuss the ways in which the book's protagonists—Carmel and Beth—display courage. How do those demonstrations compare to the "courage" we see in Gramps, Dorothy, and Paul?

11. Beth says she feels "better in an environment that says: normality is paper thin." How does the world move on as Beth struggles with her grief? Did you notice historical or cultural clues that gave you a sense of when the narrative takes place? Did it matter? Look closely at pg. 247.