



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

I'll be gone in the dark by Michelle McNamara

Summary

A masterful true crime account of the Golden State Killer—the elusive serial rapist turned murderer who terrorized California for over a decade—from Michelle McNamara, the gifted journalist who died tragically while investigating the case.

"You'll be silent forever, and I'll be gone in the dark."

For more than ten years, a mysterious and violent predator committed fifty sexual assaults in Northern California before moving south, where he perpetrated ten sadistic murders.

Then he disappeared, eluding capture by multiple police forces and some of the best detectives in the area.

Three decades later, Michelle McNamara, a true crime journalist who created the popular website TrueCrimeDiary.com, was determined to find the violent psychopath she called "the Golden State Killer." Michelle pored over police reports, interviewed victims, and embedded herself in the online communities that were as obsessed with the case as she was.

At the time of the crimes, the Golden State Killer was between the ages of eighteen and thirty, Caucasian, and athletic—capable of vaulting tall fences. He always wore a mask.

After choosing a victim—he favored suburban couples—he often entered their home when no one was there, studying family pictures, mastering the layout. He attacked while they slept, using a flashlight to awaken and blind them. Though they could not recognize him, his victims recalled his voice: a guttural whisper through clenched teeth, abrupt and threatening.

I'll Be Gone in the Dark—the masterpiece McNamara was writing at the time of her sudden death—offers an atmospheric snapshot of a moment in American history and a chilling account of a criminal mastermind and the wreckage he left behind.

It is also a portrait of a woman's obsession and her unflagging pursuit of the truth.

Framed by an introduction by Gillian Flynn and an afterword by the author's husband, Patton Oswalt, the book was completed by Michelle's lead researcher and a close colleague. Utterly original and

compelling, it is destined to become a true crime classic—and may at last unmask the Golden State Killer.

Discussion Questions

1. The book's epigraph is the poem "Crime Club" by Weldon Kees. How does this poem set the tone for the story that follows?
2. Early in the book, Michelle McNamara writes, "I need to see his face. He loses his power when we know his face." What is the Golden State Killer's power, and how would he lose this if he was identified?
3. Michelle writes about an incident in her own neighborhood in Los Angeles, when her neighbor's house was robbed. "We make well-intentioned promises of protection we can't always keep. I'll look out for you." Do you think we, as a society, have lost a sense of neighborliness? What factors do you attribute to this loss? How have changes in technology, economics, architecture—house and planned community designs—impacted you, your neighborhood, and society? Is there a remedy to bring us closer together?
4. While *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* is a true crime story—a chronicle of the Golden State Killer—it is also a memoir. Why do you think she included the story of her childhood and relationship with her mother in this story? In the book Michelle confesses, "Writing this now, I'm struck by two incompatible truths that pain me. No one would have taken more joy from this book than my mother. And I probably wouldn't have felt the freedom to write it until she was gone." Why couldn't she write this book if her mother had still been alive? Why is it difficult for many people to reconcile parental expectations and disappointments with their own pursuits?
5. In following Michelle's search to unmask the GSK, what did you learn about her and the kind of person she is? How does getting to know her shape the story and your understanding of the case as it unfolds? Meeting Michelle in these pages, does she fit with your "profile" of a true crime obsessive? How would you characterize Michelle if you were introducing her to a friend?
6. Novelist Gillian Flynn wrote the introduction to the book. How are crime novelists and true crime writers alike, and how do they differ? Do you read crime novels? If so, what draws you to them? How does the experience of reading a crime novel compare to reading a true crime account? What emotions do each elicit?
7. Michelle writes, "Sacramento's was not an isolated problem. US crime rates show a steady rise in violent crime throughout the 1960s and '70s, peaking in 1980." The term "serial killer" was coined in the 1970s. Why do you think so many of these serial offenders surfaced at this time?
8. What does Michelle tell us about the way crimes are investigated? What did you learn about the professionals who investigate them? What, if anything, might have helped them in their search for the GSK? How has technology improved their ability to share information? Has it in any way made solving crime more difficult?

9. In the book, Michelle reflects on the similarity between criminals like GSK and the people hunting them. "What I don't mention is the uneasy realization I've had about how much our frenetic searching mirrors the compulsive behavior—the trampled flowerbeds, scratch marks on window screens, crank calls—of the one we seek." Are there other shared characteristics between these two different kinds of hunters?
10. Many of GSK's victims were men. How did the crimes impact the surviving men and the women? Why do you think men might have a more difficult time coping with the aftermath of the kind of crime GSK perpetrated?
11. With so many attacks taking place in such a small area in Sacramento, do you think the East Area Rapist lived in one of those neighborhoods? Why do you think he chose the houses he targeted? How do you think the geography of those subdivisions contributed to the effectiveness of his attacks?
12. With the proliferation of genetic testing services, people can find out about their heritage and links to others who share their DNA. Currently, genetic testing services like 23andMe cannot upload the DNA of criminals for possible familial matches. The colleagues who finished the book after Michelle's death use a quote from Jurassic Park to highlight the issue: "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." Why can't law enforcement use these services as a tool? Should an exception be made in cases like GSK?
13. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* is a living testament not only to Michelle McNamara and her unwavering commitment to this story, but to the law enforcement professionals who have pursued him. What are your impressions of the detectives? Did you find yourself judging them for failing to capture GSK?
14. Many people have investigated this case, from police detectives to amateurs. What made the GSK case so difficult to solve? His crime spree seems to have stopped in 1986. Do you have a theory that explains why he suddenly disappeared?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.