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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

When We Believed in Mermaids by Barbara O'Neal

Summary

Josie Bianci was killed years ago on a train during a terrorist attack. Gone forever. It's what her sister, Kit, an ER doctor in Santa Cruz, has always believed. Yet all it takes is a few heart-wrenching seconds to upend Kit's world. Live coverage of a club fire in Auckland has captured the image of a woman stumbling through the smoke and debris. Her resemblance to Josie is unbelievable. And unmistakable. With it comes a flood of emotions -- grief, loss, and anger -- that Kit finally has a chance to put to rest: by finding the sister who's been living a lie.

After arriving in New Zealand, Kit begins her journey with the memories of the past: of days spent on the beach with Josie. Of a lost teenage boy who'd become part of their family. And of a trauma that has haunted Kit and Josie their entire lives.

Now, if two sisters are to reunite, it can only be by unearthing long-buried secrets and facing a devastating truth that has kept them apart far too long. To regain their relationship, they may have to lose everything.

Discussion Questions

1. How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately or did it take you a while to get into it? How did you feel while you were reading it – amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored ...?
2. Do you think Kit's attitude to her sister's tale was influenced by her own sudden involvement with a man?
3. What is the significance of the sentence "Jesus wept"? Why does the author use it in her story?
4. At the very end of the book, Kit "feels the ghosts around her". Dylan smokes a joint. Her dad slaps the dust off his jeans, his watch in his shirt pocket. She writes, " We never found it, and I cried for days over that one thing." What did this mean?
5. Talk about how siblings can experience moments in their shared childhood differently.

6. Discuss the differences and similarities between Kit and Josie. Why does one sister walk away from her old life and not tell her family?
7. Some of this story is told in flashbacks. It also has alternating viewpoints between Kit and Mari, with each chapter revealing more of the past while also moving the present story forward. Discuss what you liked and didn't like about the way the novel was structured.
8. What will you remember from this book a year from now?
9. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?
10. Did this book change you in anyway? For example, did it give you a new perspective? Did you learn something new?