

HOLIDAY HOUSE

READING GROUP

GUIDE

Grades 9 & Up



HC: 9780823457014 · e-book: 9780823459186

Dead Girls Talking

by Megan Cooley Peterson

ABOUT THE BOOK

The town of Wolf Ridge calls him **The Smiley Face Killer**. Bettina Holland calls him her father.

Everyone knows Bettina's father was the one who murdered her mother a decade ago. It's the subject of podcasts, murder tours, and even a highly anticipated docuseries. But after growing up grappling with what that means, a string of copycat murders forces Bett to answer a harder question: What if he didn't?

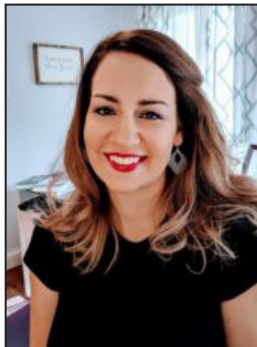
Old-money Bett must team up with the only person willing to investigate alongside her: bookish goth girl Eugenia, the mortician's daughter, who everyone says puts the makeup on the corpses. Can this "true crime princess" unmask a murderer who's much closer to home than she ever imagined?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Bettina's father is in prison for murdering her mother. She lives with her mother's parents, Wells and Vivian Holland. Describe Bettina's relationship with her grandparents. Debate whether they are too overprotective of Bettina. For many in Wolf Ridge, women are "beautiful playthings" (p. 13). How does Vivian Holland fit this image? In what way did Prudence, Bettina's mother, rebel against her parents and their view of women? Cite evidence from the novel that Bettina is also rebelling against her grandparents.
- Describe Wolf Ridge. How does Bettina feel trapped in this small town? Explain what Bettina means by "What we lack in culture, we make up for in small-mindedness" (p. 12). In what ways are Bettina's grandparents "small-minded"? Why won't Granddad say Prudence's name aloud? How does this affect Bettina? What other characters are small-minded? The Hollands are on a higher socioeconomic level than most people in Wolf Ridge. Cite evidence from the novel that Wells Holland uses his status to his gain.
- Trapper McGrath, Bettina's dad, vows he is innocent. What is the first hint that Bettina's grandfather knows more about the murder of Prudence than he reveals? How is it evident that Carl Bigsby, the chief of police, is hiding information about the murder? Jack Ledbetter, the prosecuting attorney, hanged himself on the tenth anniversary of Trapper's trial. Why doesn't Bettina's grandfather want her to attend Ledbetter's wake? What happens when he sees her there?
- At one time, Bettina was friends with Natalie Baker, Holly Walters, and Madison Tran. What happened to their friendship? How do Natalie, Holly, and Madison turn into mean girls? Describe Eugenia Cline. How do the kids in Wolf Ridge treat her? Discuss how Eugenia deals with being an outsider. How do Bettina and Eugenia become friends? What do they learn from one another?

- Wolf Ridge is the scene of several murders of young women. Bettina finds the body of Melissa Atkins, a worker at Lydia's bar. Scratched into Melissa's forehead is "I'M BACK." How does this suggest that this murder and that of Prudence McGrath are related? Then Bettina finds the body of Holly Walters under a dumpster. She wonders, "Why do I keep finding bodies? Am I just bad luck . . . or is there some other reason?" (p. 194). What other reason might there be?
- Ada, Bettina's aunt, runs a podcast called Sister of Doubt. Why is she so convinced that Trapper is innocent of her sister's murder? What is Bettina's opinion of her aunt? Debate whether her opinion is shaped by her grandparents' view of their daughter. Explain why Ledbetter's widow calls on Ada. What information does she have that changes Bettina's memory of Trapper's trial? Why does Marjorie Ledbetter come forward with the information now? What causes Bettina and Eugenia to seek Ada's help?
- Lydia, a local bar owner, is profiting off the murder of Bettina's mom by leading a tour of the murder scene. Explain why Bettina calls this a betrayal. Discuss why Bettina's grandfather doesn't attempt to put a stop to the tour. Why does Bettina think the tour is pure theater? Discuss why Bettina and Eugenia take the tour after they are well into the investigation of the murder. What is Lydia's reaction when she sees Bettina on the tour?
- Discuss Bettina and Eugenia's approach to solving the murders. Which girl is the mastermind behind the investigation? Explain why Bettina's granddad keeps warning her to leave the past behind. The girls go to the county courthouse to get the transcript of the trial. What do they learn from the transcript? Why does Eugenia think that Bettina is the killer's next target?
- Chart the clues that point to David Dennison as a suspect. Discuss the risk the girls take by breaking into his house. How does he explain the evidence? What about Xavier Hart? Why does he have Melissa's wallet in the glove compartment of his truck? How does this change the way Bettina feels about Xavier?
- How do the girls identify the murderer? Explain what Bettina means by "Natalie's another girl my father's killed, spiritually. All without getting his hands dirty" (p. 294). In what way were Bigsby, Wells Holland, and Ledbetter covertly guilty?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Megan Cooley Peterson is an author, editor, and coffee drinker. As a teenager, Megan was part of a repressive, cult-like doomsday church that didn't like to be questioned. She questioned anyway. Megan has written about her experience in *Bustle*, highlighting how it helped shape *The Liar's Daughter*, her first young adult novel. The author of more than eighty nonfiction books for children, including *Dead Girls Talking* with Holiday House, she has written on a wide variety of topics, including dinosaurs, sharks, urban legends, and haunted objects. Megan lives in Minnesota with her husband and daughter. Learn more at MeganCooleyPeterson.com or connect on X @MeganNCPeterson or Instagram @MeganCooleyPeterson.