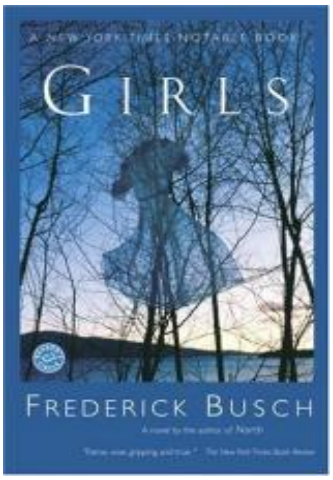
ReadingGroupGuides
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Girls

by Frederick Busch



About the Book

In the unrelenting cold and bitter winter of upstate New York, Jack and his wife, Fanny, are trying to cope with the desperate sorrow they feel over the death of their young daughter. The loss forms a chasm in their relationship as Jack, a sardonic Vietnam vet, looks for a way to heal them both.

Then, in a nearby town, a fourteen-year-old girl disappears somewhere between her home and church. Though she is just one of the hundreds of children who vanish every year in America, Jack turns all his attention to this little girl. For finding what has become of this child could be Jack's salvation--if he can just get to her in time....

Discussion Guide

1. The weather in **Girls** is severe and relentless. What role does this weather play in the novel, and why? What other books have you studied in which the weather was such a large part of the story? How do climate and landscape tend to affect the lives of individuals as well as larger societies?

2. Jack is a Vietnam veteran, a self-educated, blue-collar kind of guy. His wife, Fanny, is an emergency room nurse, a job requiring considerable education and training. In what ways do you think their differing backgrounds affect their relationship? Are these effects beneficial or damaging? What commonalities can you find in their backgrounds and/or jobs? Do you think these are sufficient to keep them together?

3. Did you want Jack and Fanny to get back together? Why or why not, and why do you think Busch arrived at the ending?

4. Do you think this book fits into the typical detective-novel genre? Why or why not? Why do you think readers like to categorize types of novels? Do you think **Girls** belongs to any distinct category or genre?

5. The first chapter directly follows the final chapter in chronology. Why do you think the author placed it at the beginning of the book? Did you go back and re-read the first chapter after completing the novel? Did doing so alter your perception of the book? If so, how?

6. Why do you think Jack and Fanny couldn't discuss the death of their baby after so much time? Has there ever been something you or someone you know couldn't or wouldn't discuss? Why do you think people close themselves away like that? How might people avoid doing so, or help each other overcome it?

7. In recent years there unfortunately have been many highly publicized cases of missing girls like Janice Tanner. Do you think these cases have always occurred and that are just being played up by the media today? Or do you think something has shifted in our society that is causing an increase in such tragedies? Do you discuss these disappearances with your friends or your families? If so, how do you respond? Do you feel safe in modern society?

8. Jack lives in a world of extreme coldness, bleakness, and silence. It seems that the only lightness in his world is his nameless dog. Why do you think this is so? What function does the dog serve in the novel as a whole? In Jack's life? What do you think the author had in mind when he chose to include the dog in this story?

9. When did you as a reader think you knew who was responsible for Janice Tanner's disappearance? Who did you think did it, and why? Were you right?

10. What role does Professor Piri play in this drama?

11. Fanny is repeatedly described as capable and competent, and of course, her job is one of helping to save lives. Juxtapose this with the circumstances and aftermath of their daughter's death, and discuss what effect this combination has had on Fanny.

12. As this is a work of fiction, the writer could do with his characters whatever he wished. Why do you think the author let Jack get beat up so badly?

13. Jack and Fanny's marriage is a paradox: two people who love and are bound to each other, and yet cannot seem to live together. Discuss this paradox and why it exists. Do you know anyone with such a paradox in their lives? What is it like, and how do they resolve or live with it?

14. Why do you think Jack found Rosalie Piri so irresistible? He obviously loved Fanny and really wanted to make it work with her; yet he barely hesitated before he got involved with Rosalie. What do you think motivated him, or prevented him from resisting the affair with her?

15. Why didn't Jack drag Fanny in to talk to Archie? Why didn't Archie push for them to get counseling together? Many people in our society often resist counseling when they most need it. Why do you think this is so?

16. Jack goes into the Tanners' church, and still finds himself unable to pray. Yet he really wants to. Why can't Jack pray?

17. Identify all the different girls in the book who could contribute to the book's title. What do they all have in common? How do they differ? Do you think **Girls** was a good choice of title? If not, what might you have named the book?

18. Why does Jack harass William, the drug dealer from Staten Island? Jack knows he's not really guilty, at least not of being involved in the Janice Tanner case. Yet he knowingly beats him, and quite brutally at that. Why would Jack, who is basically a good man, do such a thing?

19. What do you think was the author's purpose in including the subplot about the vice president's impending visit?

Author Bio

Since 1971, award-winning author Frederick Busch has published more than twenty works of fiction and non-fiction, including the novels **The Mutual Friend**, about Charles Dickens, **Rounds**, **Invisible Mending**, **Sometimes I Live in the Country**, **Harry and Catherine**, **Long Way from Home**, and the bestselling **Closing Arguments** and **Girls**. A compilation of his short fiction,**The Children in the Woods: New and Selected Stories**, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1995. His most recent books are **A Dangerous Profession**, a collection of essays about the writing life, and **Letters to a Fiction Writer**, an anthology for which he served as both editor and contributor. A new short story collection, **Don't Tell Anyone**, will be published early in 2001.

Critical Praise

"**Girls** is about pain and what happens when pain can't find its way out of the human vessel....**Girls** is unusually entertaining.... In the end, this is a chilling story about the guilt of adulthood. "

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