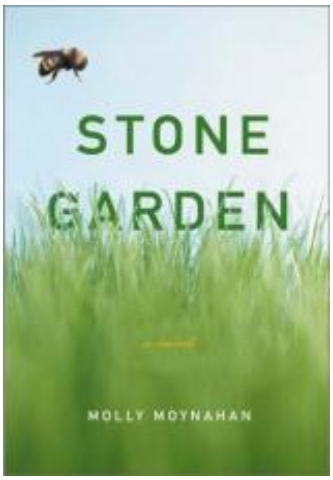
Stone Garden

by Molly Moynahan



About the Book

By turns poignant and wry, Molly Moynahan's **Stone Garden** introduces a candid, young narrator struggling to cope with the sudden and violent death of her lifelong friend, Matthew Swan. From the novel's arresting first chapter, Alice gives us a provocative portrait of her life without Matthew, a loss that coincides with her senior year in high school. Though Alice had known him since childhood and fallen in love with him as a teenager, certain aspects of Matthew could only be discovered once he was gone. She seeks solace in talks with his unconventional mother, while her own parents make awkward attempts to help her grieve. She befriends a classmate who witnessed a frightening crime. And Alice begins volunteering at a writing program for prison inmates, which takes her perception of the world in a startling new direction. With each of these small, healing doses, Alice learns to embrace life again.

Wrought with sensitivity and sparkling wit, **Stone Garden** captures the transition from innocence to understanding that we all must make. We hope that the following questions will enhance your discussion of this mesmerizing novel.

Discussion Guide

1. The stone referred to in the title evokes many metaphors, including the heavy weight of grief and the starkness of tombstones. Where are the novel's gardens? Where does Alice encounter the vitality and new growth associated with conventional gardens?

2. Matthew's character is crafted through memories and artifacts. What were your impressions of him throughout the novel? In what way did your image of him change?

3. What does the loss of Matthew represent to each of the book's primary characters? What distinctions are made between Matthew's status as missing and the eventual confirmation of his murder? Which of the characters most closely mirrors your own responses to grief?

4. What do the various women in Alice's world -- especially her mother, her teachers, and Catherine -- teach her about womanhood? Was Matthew typical of the men in **Stone Garden**?

5. With the exception of Howard, the Rahway inmates come from socioeconomic backgrounds far removed from that of Alice and her friends. Discuss the impact of money on the various characters' lives. Do you consider any of the characters to be fortunate? How do you define good fortune?

6. Alice is savvy enough to recognize what she represents to the prisoners -- purity of heart, a princess on prom night. But what is her own ideal? In what way does Matthew's death shape her aspirations?

7. What does sexuality mean to Alice at various points in the novel? Why might Molly Moynahan have chosen to portray Alice's relationship with Matthew as unconsummated?

8. How does Alice's coming-of-age experience, including rites of passage such as prom night, compare to your own? What are your observations about contemporary adolescence in America?

9. Does the novel's depiction of rage and forgiveness match your impressions of society? Have you been subjected to an act whose perpetrator you could not forgive?

10. What is the significance of Alice's experiences (sexual as well as platonic) with Hal? How does he compare to Morgan? What do you predict for her relationship with Morgan?

11. Consider the form and settings chosen for **Stone Garden**. The novel unfolds in first person, in the voice of a highly perceptive teen. The setting varies between an upper class East Coast suburb and the Spartan locale of a prison. How do these details enhance the overall storytelling?

12. What was your reaction to the curriculum at Alice's school? Do you think it would benefit public school students?

13. In chapter five, Alice explains why she chose the Rahway writing class for her senior project. How does it help her gain power over her trauma? How is the balance of power divided among Hal, Alice, and the inmates?

14. What is the nature of Alice's friendship with Sigrid? In what ways do they lead parallel lives? In what way is Sigrid's experience the opposite of Alice's?

15. How might the novel have changed had it been told from Matthew's point of view?

16. Are Catherine and her classmates the only graduates at the end of the novel? Do you imagine that the prisoners experience any sort of new chapter in their lives after participating in the writing class? How might the other adults' lives unfold after that semester?

17. What do you predict for Alice's road trip with Catherine?

Author Bio

Molly Moynahan is a high school English teacher and has taught creative writing at various colleges. She lives in Chicago.

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