# Secret Language

by Monica Wood




## About the Book

Faith and Connie endured the same childhood as daughters of egocentric, semi-famous actors who can scarcely take care of themselves. But the two sisters could not be more different. Connie learned to beg for attention, clamor for approval, and fill the silence with words. Faith turned inward, shrinking from the tender emotions that make up an ordinary life. Despite their differences, the sisters came to rely on each other exclusively. But lately, after years of quiet connection, Faith and Connie seem to have lost the ties that once held them close. Faith has a home and two growing sons, but is still unable to fathom unconditional love. Connie, a flight attendant, is always searching, ever-expecting to find her true place in life at the end of each long flight. But a series of shocking, revelatory events will bring the sisters back to each other?and forever alter how they define love, fulfillment, and most importantly, family.

-Click here to listen to a podcast with Monica Wood.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** When Faith remembers her wedding, she believes "that if she had only been able to warm herself, if she had only stayed inside her body as she pledged forever and true, she might have learned to live with a man like Joe, a man who loved her." What is Faith acknowledging about herself here? Does it seem like a fair self-assessment?

**2.** Why is it so hard for Faith to be part of her husband's family? After Joe confesses his affair, Faith speaks of an "unpleasant but strangely welcome feeling: her old, frozen self, finally delivered from the terrible trouble of love." Why is the feeling unpleasant? Why welcome? What has been troubling, for her, about the love that Joe--and the Fullers--seem to offer and, perhaps, demand?

**3.** What kind of mother is Faith? What kind of sister? What kind of wife? What kind of love is she adept at? What kinds of love mystify her?

**4.** What characters seem to speak a "secret language" in this book?

**5.** Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy holds that art is the means of transferring feeling from one man's heart to another. Where does Wood best convey the feelings of her characters?

**6.** A pleasure of fiction: We can understand another person's version of the world, even if it isn't our own version of the world. When did you trust a character's version of the world, even if you didn't agree with it? Did you ever fail to trust a character's version of the world when you disagreed with it? I.e., did your disagreement ever make you feel that the character wasn't believable?

**7.** What does Isadora James mean to Connie? To Faith? How do you interpret Isadora's interest in finding her half-sisters and maintaining a relationship with them?

**8.** Faith and Connie are clearly damaged by their past. What, exactly, is it that they can't seem to escape about their past? Are they doomed to re-enact the past forever, or does the story suggest a way to move beyond childhood damage?

**9.** How would you describe Connie and Stewart's relationship?

**10.** Connie and Faith are very different people, yet Connie, too, struggles with love. What is hard for her about love? Faith, we know, fears love, as if it might kill her. Does Connie have a similar fear?

**11.** When Connie is in the hospital, Isadora whispers to Faith, "I wish I *had* to be here, Faith. Some burdens are good." Given Isadora's later behavior, it is hard to take this sentence at face value. Is Isadora in earnest? Does she seem to be speaking the truth, whether or not she means it?

**12. Secret Language** circles back to memories of Granny (memories of Granny's home start the book and memories of Granny seem to resolve the sisters' altercation in Part VI) and to significant performances. (Part I ends with the line, "It is opening night," and Part VIII is titled "Opening Night.") Why does the novel circle back this way? What does the novel seem to be suggesting about memory and the influence of the past?

## Author Bio

Monica Wood is a novelist, memoirist and playwright; a recipient of the Maine Humanities Council Carlson Prize for contributions to the public humanities; and a recipient of the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance Distinguished Achievement Award for contributions to the literary arts. She lives in Portland, Maine, with her husband, Dan Abbott, and their cat, Susie.

## Critical Praise

"A beautifully sustained narrative, remarkable for its clarity and depth."

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