Talking to the Dead

by Helen Dunmore



About the Book

Helen Dunmore, the first winner of the Orange Prize for fiction (the women-only version of the Booker Prize) has prepared a deliciously compelling story of sister love, crime, and tragedy in *Talking to the Dead*.

Nina and Isabel are the closest of sisters, bound together since childhood by the devastating, sudden death of their baby brother. The two women have created very different lives for themselves. Dark, sensual Nina works as a London-based freelance photographer, and beautiful, remote Isabel has married and retreated to country life. But when Isabel gives birth to her first child, and Nina comes to help look after her, images from the hidden past rush back. The new baby is so like the brother who died in his crib twenty-five years before.

Against the backdrop of the hottest summer for a century, a drama of suspicion and betrayal unfolds. Bonds of love and shared history are stretched to the breaking point as Nina begins an illicit affair. Each sister claims to possess knowledge that could destroy the other. But who is lying, and who is telling the truth? As the past becomes alive and dangerous, it forces Isabel to commit a shocking, transforming act.

Fast-moving, complex, and exquisitely crafted, *Talking to the Dead* seduces us into believing both sides of the story, until the truth is at last revealed, a truth that will stay with us long after the last page is consumed.

Discussion Guide

1. Nina's mention of the death of Colin early on in the novel alluded to foul play and set the stage for the reader's delicate scrutiny of Nina and Isabel's role in the incident. How did you interpret the passage? How and why did your perceptions change throughout the course of the novel?

2. Reflecting on their childhood, Nina explained the way that she and Isabel marveled at their personality differences.

Growing up, each sister played upon her variance from the other as if it were "a game that eventually played us," as Nina says. What did Nina mean by this? How were the sisters "played" by this game? What role has each sister assumed in their relationship?

3. Richard and Edward figure prominently in the novel in that they extract unique information about Nina and Isabel. What do these men bring out of each of the sisters?

4. What does Nina's sensuousness in food and sex symbolize? Contrast this with Isabel's anorexia and frigidity.

5. What role does the climate, especially the heat, play in the story?

6. Our understanding of story is often molded by the point of view from which it is told. Discuss how you think the portrayal of the characters, and the depiction of specific scenes throughout the story would vary if told from Isabel's perspective?

7. What is the significance of the final scene?

Author Bio

Helen Dunmore is the author of 12 books, including THE GREATCOAT; THE BETRAYAL, a *New York Times* Editors' Choice; THE SIEGE, a bestseller and finalist for the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award; and A SPELL OF WINTER, winner of the Orange Prize.

Critical Praise

" Helen Dunmore has created two of the most intriguing sisters in recent literary memory, women linked not only by birth and an arresting intimacy, but also by a mysteriously unexplained death. Peeling away the sisters' secrets, and doing so in rich, sensual prose, Dunmore in *Talking to the Dead* offers the reader descriptions of food, cooking, and movable feasts so gorgeous and lush one feels ravenous at every turn. "

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