

# The Lost Child

by Caryl Phillips

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## About the Book

Renowned for his mesmerizing examinations of identity and power, the internationally acclaimed novelist Caryl Phillips now weaves a tale of modern exile with elements of *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*.

At the heart of *THE LOST CHILD* is Monica Johnson, an Oxford student who is disowned by her parents after she falls in love with an expat graduate student. Through marriage and single motherhood, she struggles to survive, navigating a lifetime of false promises while her young sons try to understand their place in the world. Just as Heathcliff, one of literature's most enigmatic lost boys, is haunted by his past, Phillips's luminous characters reinvent themselves to emerge from a landscape and a community that are at once foreign and familiar to them.

Brimming with unforgettable narrators, *THE LOST CHILD* gives voice to timeless longings, recounted with piercing clarity.

## Discussion Guide

1. As *THE LOST CHILD* unfolded, how did the opening scene affect your reading? How is the image of Heathcliff's mother echoed in subsequent chapters?
2. The quest for social status and the pain of alienation drive much of the plot in *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*. What might Emily Brontë have thought of the Johnson family?
3. What is at the root of Monica and Julius's attraction to each other? In what ways are they both 'foreigners'?

4. In part IV, "The Family," Phillips provides a moving portrait of the Brontë sisters and their life with their brother and father. How did their fates influence your perception of the other characters in *THE LOST CHILD*?
5. What is at stake for Ronald Johnson in his career and within his household? Why is he willing to turn his back on Monica? Does he abandon her, or does she abandon him? If you were Ronald's daughter, would you have complied with his wishes?
6. What aspirations and obligations shape Ruth's and Monica's approaches to motherhood? How do their experiences compare with those of Tommy and Ben's foster parents?
7. Discuss the title. In what ways are the novel's adult characters just as lost as the children? Do any of the characters truly find their way home?
8. Do Lloyd Samuels and Julius have a realistic chance to transform their worlds? Why isn't Julius able to extend his quest for equality to women, acknowledging the hypocrisy in his treatment of Monica?
9. What role does education play in the characters' lives, from Ronald's pride when Monica is admitted to Oxford to the struggles Ben and Tommy face as schoolboys?
10. In part VI, "Childhood," the point of view shifts to Ben's. How does his narration change the tone of the novel? If you were going to create a sound track for your life's turning points, which songs would you choose?
11. Is Monica's relationship with Derek very different from her marriage to Julius? In part VIII, "Alone," what truths emerge about love and survival? Are Ben and Mandy the exception to the rules?
12. What cultural revolutions are captured in the novel, from Britain's colonial era through the aftermath of the 1960s? Do the characters illustrate the growth of freedom, or does liberation continually evade them?
13. What makes Tommy more vulnerable than his brother throughout his life? Does Ben wisely protect himself when he rebuffs Ronald, or does he miss an opportunity to receive comfort and security from his grandfather?
14. How does *THE LOST CHILD* expand on the notions of identity and ancestry explored in Caryl Phillips's previous novels? How did *THE LOST CHILD* enhance your enjoyment of *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*?

## Author Bio

Caryl Phillips was born in Saint Kitts and came to Britain at the age of four months. Raised in Leeds and educated at Oxford University, he is the author of numerous works of fiction and non-fiction, including *DANCING IN THE DARK*, *CROSSING THE RIVER* and *COLOR ME ENGLISH*. His novel *A DISTANT SHORE* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and his other awards include a Lannan Foundation Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship and Britain's oldest literary award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and lives in New York. For more information, visit [www.carylphillips.com](http://www.carylphillips.com).

## Critical Praise

The thematic links between the modern story and WUTHERING HEIGHTS only become clear over time, and --- even then --- they're too rich and subtle to work as simple allegory. Empire and race are among Phillips's concerns, but he also offers heartbreaking depictions of alienation and the fragility of human relationships. Gorgeously crafted and emotionally shattering.

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