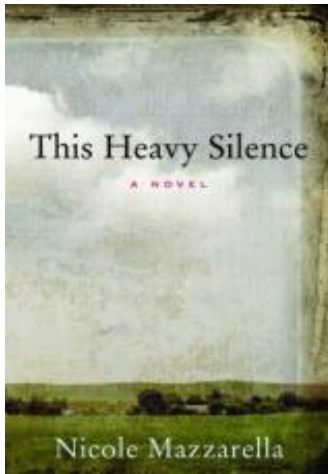


# This Heavy Silence

by Nicole Mazzarella

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## About the Book

Strong, resilient, and deeply loyal, Dottie Connell farms her family's three hundred acres in rural Ohio alone, having sacrificed love and family for land she does not own. A sudden, inexplicable event leaves the daughter of her childhood friend in her care. Pressured by her community to allow her former fiancée to raise the child, Dottie must face the past she has worked fifteen years to forget.

Spanning a decade, **This Heavy Silence** explores the power of the vows we make to others, and, more binding, those we make to ourselves. Evoking the hardship, spring-fed beauty, and the complexities of community in the rural Midwest, this beautifully observed, debut novel leads us to question our ideas about motherhood, faith, and the debts we owe.

## Discussion Guide

1. What are the various reasons that Dottie believes she raises Mattie? Discuss these motivations. Does she fully understand her motivations? What are the implications if she does understand her motivations?
2. Why does Dottie farm her family's land? What conscious and unconscious vows did Dottie make to others and to herself? Which influenced her choices more? Why did Dottie continue to fulfill those vows even though many isolated her further? How is Stanley's vow different or similar to Dottie's vows?
3. The actions of parents influence many generations in *This Heavy Silence*. Even though Dottie's mother died a number of years ago, she has a significant role in the novel. Discuss the type of parenting received by Dottie, then Mattie. Discuss the pattern of fathers favoring one child. Consider how the "sins of the father" impacted each generation, including Mattie's son. Discuss the various parallels of parent/child relationships throughout the novel.
4. Dottie trusts few people. Consider who she trusts and why she can trust these individuals? Which relationships impact

her more  $\neg$  is it with those she trusts or mistrusts? What influences her trust/mistrust of God?

5. Consider how Dottie's gender influences her community's expectations of how she should raise Mattie. How are her deficiencies as a mother accentuated by her gender? Are the women in the community justified in encouraging Dottie to give Mattie to her former fiancée?

6. Discuss the title. Consider the role of silence in various relationships throughout the novel. Dottie says, "The heaviness of the silence that followed the prayers felt as immense as God. I couldn't say what I expected to hear. But the silence settled on me like an accusation, and in those moments I believed there was a God." Why does Dottie hear the silence as an accusation? Why does the silence cause her to believe that God might exist?

7. Three months after Mattie leaves, Dottie says that Mattie has become too much like her. Does Mattie share any similarities with Dottie? How do you think Mattie would respond to this? Why does Mattie give Dottie the amaryllis?

8. Discuss the role of work in Dottie's life. How does it both connect her to and isolate her from others? Consider the symbolic nature of her work. For example, when she births the lamb or digs the trench with Stanley.

9. How does the first person point of view influence your reading of the novel? How do you come to understand Dottie by the lack of information or emotions in the narration? In what instances do the dialogue and actions of other characters reveal Dottie's lack of understanding of herself or others?

## Author Bio

Nicole Mazzarella teaches creative writing at Wheaton College in Illinois. **This Heavy Silence** is her first novel. She lives with her husband in Wheaton, Illinois.

## Critical Praise

"Independent, self-sufficient, tenacious--Dottie Connell, the heroine of Nicole Mazzarella's moving new novel, values her plain farmwoman's strengths. Those strengths have aided her in the long battle to keep her father's farm. But when she is given custody of her best friend's little girl, she is forced to recognize her limits. Inch by painful inch, Dottie reconsiders her life's choices, and maps afresh the boundaries of the human heart. **This Heavy Silence** is a fiercely beautiful meditation on will, desire and love's limitations. The work of an artist of deep commitment, it will linger long in readers' memories."

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