



FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

READING GROUP GUIDE

Where Did You Sleep Last Night?

A Personal History

by **Danzy Senna**

“One of the most promising writers Boston has produced
this decade.” —Alisa Valdes, *The Boston Globe*



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208 pages



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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Danzy Senna's *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* We hope they will enrich your experience of this compelling testament to history, family, and race.

In the tradition of James McBride's *The Color of Water*, this is the story of a daughter's attempt to recover the shards of her fragmented childhood—and to resolve a long-buried family mystery. When Danzy Senna's parents married in 1968, they defied history: her mother was a white Bostonian with a blue-blood heritage; her father was a black man born in the South, the son of an artistic mother and an unknown father. Despite their divergent backgrounds, they had much in common—they were two beautiful young writers with a passion for challenging the norm. But eight years later, they were engaged in what one friend called “the ugliest divorce in Boston's history.” After that, their children had only sporadic visits with their father, a man mired in rage and alcoholism and haunted by his own fractured youth.

QUESTIONS FOR
DISCUSSION

Decades later, Danzy begins to delve into the murky waters of her ancestry, leading to an unlikely road trip with her father, as well as encounters with distant relatives who give her vivid but often contradictory accounts of the lineage. *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* will challenge some of your most profound beliefs about family ties and the history of race in America.

1. The memoir's title evokes an image of someone who is accused of being promiscuous. How did the title affect your reading?
2. In the opening scenes, Danzy describes living in a building that is "multicultural to the point of absurdity" (p. 17), in contrast to the stratified Boston of her youth. Why does that form of tolerance vex her?
3. Danzy describes the hardships faced when her father, Carl, ignored child support payments. She also describes Carl's fixation on an imaginary fortune he believes his ex-wife possesses. How does money influence the way Danzy's family interacts? What do their beliefs about money say about them?
4. What attracted Danzy's parents to each other? Could anything have saved their marriage? To what extent is Danzy's anguish the product of her parents? To what extent is it the product of the generations before them?
5. Why was Carl able to remain brutally frank about the suffering he experienced at the Zimmer Home, while others (such as Ernestine) grew up glorifying the orphanage or rationalizing the abuse? What does Danzy begin to see in her father when she considers his childhood?
6. How was Danzy's mother, Fanny, influenced by her family history of aristocracy? What was the impact of her father's legacy as a civil rights activist and high-profile law professor at Harvard?
7. Discuss Danzy's travels in the South, both with her father and on her own. What versions of "family" does she encounter there? Does she feel at home with any of her newfound relatives? How do their recollections of Carl and Fanny compare to the stories she had grown up believing?
8. Carl has found occasional inner peace by moving to Canada and traveling to the Middle East. Do you think it is difficult for him to feel comfortable in the United States because of American history, American society, or a combination of these? What is Fanny implying when, on page 55, she says, "The only interracial couples from my generation who survived left the country"?
9. The author mentions her brother and sister throughout the book. How do siblings affect one another's experiences with their parents? How was Danzy's sense of self influenced by the fact that she was not an only child?

10. What portrait of Anna emerges in the end? What truths about Father Ryan cannot be revealed by DNA? Do you believe that Anna loved either of the men who fathered her children? Where did she find love, and some degree of power, in her life?
11. The author observes that her mother's ancestry was scrupulously documented (even in a rare book at the New York Public Library), while her father's ancestry is fraught with lore and speculation. What does the presence or absence of written records say about a family's history? Why did Danzy believe that her quest for the past would have such a significant impact on her future?
12. How does Carla's arrival affect Danzy and Carl's relationship? What sort of family did Carla wish for? What sort of family did she find?
13. What do you predict for the next generation of Sennas? What will Danzy be able to tell her son about his ancestry? What will it be like for him to grow up as a part of the eccentric family that gathered at Fanny's home for the holidays (pp. 170–173)?
14. How significant is ancestry in your family? What aspects of family history are most debated in your household?
15. Compare *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* with the author's two novels, *Symptomatic* and *Caucasia*. How is the topic of biracial children addressed in each work? What freedoms does Danzy have by addressing this topic through memoir rather than through fiction?

"Senna's dynamic storytelling illuminates personal revelations that are anything but black-and-white. A-." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"Senna throws everything into her literary stew—ambition, love, obsession, jealousy, and race." —*Elle*

"In her courageous portrait of the tumultuous union between her Boston Brahmin mother and her enigmatic black father, Danzy Senna offers a powerfully personal take on the progress of American race relations since the civil rights movement. *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* reminds us of the consequences of our origins and our inescapable desire to make sense of them." —Bliss Broyard, author of *One Drop*

"There are stories we need to find, and stories that must be told. In this masterful work of seeking and telling, hoping and letting go, Danzy Senna stalks her ancestral past like an attorney assembling the case of a lifetime. Her closing remarks prove that as improbable as it sounds, the people of this great country we call America really are indivisible; we truly are one. This book is a great gift. Read it."

—Rebecca Walker, author of *Black, White, and Jewish*

“With deft, heartbreaking restraint, Danzy Senna sets down the first telling of a moment in American history and a very human story of romance and idealism: the marriage in 1968 of two writers—her mother, a white Boston Brahmin; and her African American father, ‘Intellectual. Alcoholic. Wanderer. Race-man. Con artist.’ Out of this collision was born a third writer. Out of its agonies, this illuminating, necessary book.”
—Honor Moore, author of *The Bishop’s Daughter*

ABOUT THE
AUTHOR

Danzy Senna is the author of the novels *Symptomatic* and *Caucasia*, a bestseller.