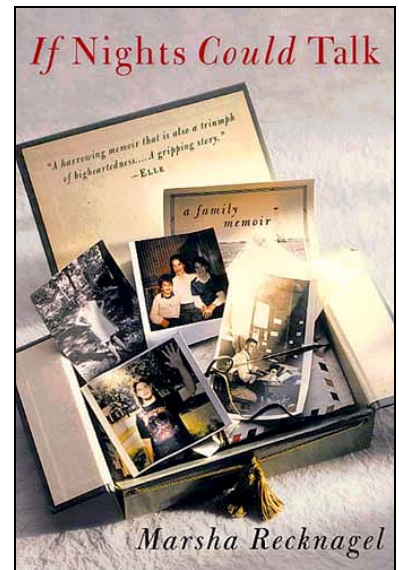


READING GROUP GUIDE

If Nights Could Talk by Marsha Recknagel



St. Martin's Press

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Introduction to If Nights Could Talk

If Nights Could Talk is a rich gothic story of a Southern family, a tale of wealth and emotional need that spans generations. Marsha Recknagel's memoir begins with the surprise appearance of her 16-year-old nephew, Jamie, who arrives on her doorstep and into her ordered, childless life. Fleeing a chaotic home run by Marsha's unstable younger brother and his wife, Jamie is an ominous creature—and the center of an ongoing family tug-of-war. For Marsha, to open the door is to risk opening herself up to the pain of the past. Reluctantly she takes him in. Thus begins the painful, terrifying, and extraordinary process of unraveling the damage inflicted by her family on one of its own.

Praise for If Nights Could Talk

"Soars to poetic heights. Recknagel is to be admired, not just for the quality of her prose but for her relentless self-scrutiny."—*The Washington Post*

"A brutally honest and riveting family memoir."—Vanessa Bush, *Booklist*

"Brave and gripping . . . Recknagel's tale of how James perseveres in his battle with undiagnosed sleep apnea, post-traumatic stress disorder and extreme dissociation, and ultimately recovers in her care, is nothing short of miraculous."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Vivid and affectionate. The pleasures of reading Recknagel are manifold."
—Richard Howard, *The Los Angeles Times*

"[A] stunning family memoir . . . It may well be the best thing published by a Houston writer this

year."—*The Houston Chronicle*

"Told with remarkable clarity, grace, and courage, *If Nights Could Talk* manages, without a shadow of sentimentality, to be the most optimistic celebration of trust I can remember reading. In her moving family memoir, Marsha Recknagel has given us heroes (and anti-heroes) we can believe in—vivid, passionate, desperate, tenacious, confused. But her own vulnerability never deflects her from what she absolutely believes in—the value of one hungry human soul—and by this devotion, almost accidentally, she saves herself."—Rosellen Brown, author of *Half a Heart*

"Marsha Recknagel has written an amazing memoir. It's a great story about the meanness in families and the love in families, about evil and redemption, and Recknagel has brought to it all the skill and whole-heartedness it requires."—Susan Cheever, author of *Note Found in a Bottle*

"There is a revelation of self here. The honesty of the narrator binds the reader to someone fully human, in pain, and above all, aware . . . Recknagel's story makes us less lonely. She brings out the humor in despair, describes it, and makes it manageable. Recknagel has created an intense and rich reality."—Robert Stone, author of *Damascus Gate*

"With this extraordinary memoir, Marsha Recknagel has triumphed against great odds . . . against the smallness of people and against the bigness of the world. Most significantly, she has triumphed against her own fears, her own darkness."—Bob Shacochis, author of *Immaculate Invasion*

"Marsha Recknagel has written the best kind of memoir—a stunning story stunningly told. There is a marvelous balance here between form and content: it paints the least deserving of its characters in lyrical, perceptive prose. It saves what can be saved of them by giving them on paper what they have not been able to give themselves in real life."—Karen Shepard, author of *An Empire of Women*

"Marsha Recknagel is a skilled writer, best at generating a flashing headlong momentum. She is very honest, shoots from the hip about herself and others, and we are completely won over by her heartfelt campaign to save at least one thing from the wreckage around her."
—Sven Birkerts, author of *The Gutenberg Elegies*

"A harrowing memoir that is also a triumph of bigheartedness . . . A gripping story."—*Elle*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Discuss the most common "myths" of your family. How does your memory of certain pivotal family moments coincide with the memories of other family members? What stories are repeated at family celebrations? How does this communal storytelling work for the family? Some might feel trapped by the roles they are given in these stories. Others might feel proud. Talk in general about the power of storytelling in your family. How do the passed down stories work for Marsha and Jamie?
2. Eudora Welty once wrote that "Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else." Is this true of *If Nights Could Talk*? What parts of the book seem particularly Southern? What parts transcend the term "regional"?

3. One reviewer of *If Nights Could Talk* wrote that "Recknagel has all the equipment we have learned to expect of a practitioner of Southern Family Romance: humor exasperated to grotesquerie." Many readers have said that while reading this book they laughed and cried at the same time. What part does humor play in this book? Is there a humor particular to the South? If so, what are the qualities that define it?
4. During the first months after Jamie's arrival, he made it clear that even the word "family" was painful for him to hear. He told Marsha that if he thought of her as family he would have to hate her. Why was language important to both of them? Why was it so important for Jamie that his symptoms had a name: post-traumatic stress disorder? How does the process of "naming" play a part in this story? Why was it important to Jamie to choose his own name? What does it mean to be named?
5. In *If Nights Could Talk*, there are many references to ghosts, fortune-tellers, palm readers, and horoscopes. How can you talk about these in terms of an overall theme? Does Jamie have to resist believing in destiny? Why? Do you believe that alcoholism is inherited? Mental illness? Think about all of the meanings of the words "inheritance" and "legacy" in relation to the people in this book.

About the Author

Marsha Recknagel has an M.F.A. from Bennington College. She teaches creative writing at Rice University in Houston, Texas.