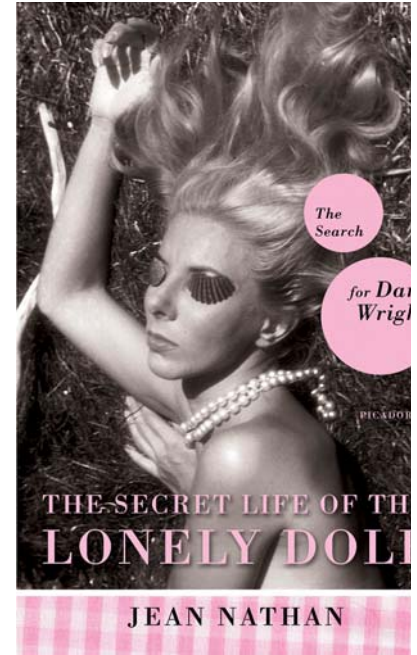


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Secret Life of the Lonely Doll: The Search for Dare Wright

by Jean Nathan

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Secret Life of the Lonely Doll* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Secret Life of the Lonely Doll*.

About the Book

In 1957, a children's book called *The Lonely Doll* was published. With its pink-and-white-checked cover and photographs featuring a wide-eyed doll, it captured the imaginations of young girls and made the author, Dare Wright, a household name. Close to forty years after its publication, the book was out of print but not forgotten. When the cover image inexplicably came to journalist Jean Nathan one afternoon, she went in search of the book—and ultimately its author. Nathan found Dare Wright living out her last days in a decrepit public hospital in Queens, New York. Over the next five years, Nathan pieced together Dare Wright's bizarre life of glamour and painful isolation to create this mesmerizing biography of a woman who struggled to escape the imprisonment of her childhood through her art.

“A splendid biography of the ethereal, emotionally damaged photographer and modelEven readers who never felt Edith’s spell will be captivated—and, perhaps, unsettled—by this modern gothic tale.”
—*People*

“Thoroughly engrossing, and fans of *The Lonely Doll* series will want to read her terrific-and terrifically disturbing-life story...Readers of this dark and haunting biography will never be able to look at *The Lonely Doll* books, or their author, in quite the same way again.”
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Compelling... [Nathan’s] gift in this slender biography of a princess enchanted by a witch is to bring to life a mystery that is deepened, more than unraveled, in the telling.”
—*Vogue*

“An exhaustively reported, gracefully written biography... This biography left me wanting to know more—about Jean Nathan.”
—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Hard to put down...This graceful biography elucidates and follows those emotional threads to create a read as compelling as Wright’s photographs.”
—*Chicago Tribune*

“[Nathan’s] sympathetic, graceful style seems appropriate for this private, elusive figure who kept such porous boundaries between her real and imaginary worlds.”
—*Village Voice*

“A probing and profound new biography...in Ms Nathan’s sensitive hands, Wright’s fate takes on a certain fluttering romance—an indignant poetry.”
—*New York Observer*

“Sensational though Nathan’s subject matter is...she never descends into exploitation. Her deft handling of these horrors recalls David and Albert Maysles’ 1976 documentary *Grey Gardens*.”
—*Time Out New York*

“Compelling psychological biography... Nathan’s meticulously researched, well-documented biography...illuminates Wright’s tangled and tragic life, work and times.”
—*Library Journal*

“You’ll be fascinated ...An amazing and compelling document of a life of public glamour and private madness.”
—*San Francisco Weekly*

“Nathan has crafted an astonishingly complete portrait of an intensely private person.....Nathan’s revelation of her own personal, emotional connection with *The Lonely Doll* reaffirms the lasting power that books can have in the life of a child.”
—*The Horn Book Magazine*

About the Author

Jean Nathan, a graduate of Williams College and Columbia School of Journalism, has written for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *Vogue*, among other publications. She lives in New York City.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Dare Wright never rebel or in any way try to loosen or escape her mother's grip on her? How might Dare's story have been different if she had taken her friend's advice and gone on to college as did so many of her classmates at the Laurel School?
2. Why is it too simple to view Edith Stevenson Wright as a monster?
3. For those familiar with Dare Wright's books for children, how does knowing Dare Wright's personal story cause you to rethink her books?
4. In many ways, Dare Wright's story is so much of its time. Dare's parents divorce in 1919, for example, came at a time when divorce was quite uncommon. Dare's mother Edie felt disgraced by this. A woman today would not need to feel such a sense of shame. Also, far fewer women were the sole support of their family. Could this story happen today?
5. Dare and Blaine's parallel stories are reminiscent of what is said about twins separated at birth, even though they were, in fact, separated at ages three and five. Both siblings never had sustained intimate relationships, neither married, both hid from the world to a large extent. What forces were at work that this should be so?
6. Why could Edie and her son never reconcile?
7. Why could Dare never bring herself to any real intimacy with a man? And why could Blaine never do that with a woman?
8. The mother-daughter relationship between Edie and Dare was extreme. Are there other stories in literature and film that relate?
9. Dare was exceptionally cut off from her feelings, or found ways to bury them. How did Dare's alcoholism transform her—beyond the obvious ways?
10. How would the experience and impact of this book have been different without the photographs that document every period of Dare Wright's life?
11. By including her own story in the book's epilogue, the author explains why *The Lonely Doll* was so important to her as a child. Do you think the author did well to add in this part?
12. What are some of the books from your childhood that haunt you or had as powerful a hold on you as *The Lonely Doll* had on Jean Nathan?
13. What do you think Edie Wright would have thought of this book? And Dare?

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