

READING GROUP GUIDE

Where Did You Sleep Last Night? *A Personal History*

by Danzy Senna

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Where Did You Sleep Last Night*.

About the Book

When Danzy Senna's parents got married in 1968, they seemed poised to defy history. They were two brilliant young American writers from wildly divergent backgrounds—a white woman with a blue-blood Bostonian lineage and a black man, the son of a struggling single mother and an unknown father. They married in a year that seemed to separate the past from the present; together, these two would snub the histories that divided them and embrace a radical future. When their marriage disintegrated eight years later, it was, as one friend put it, “the ugliest divorce in Boston’s history”—a violent, traumatic war that felt all the more heartrending given the hopeful symbolism of their union.

Decades later, Senna looks back not only at her parents' divorce but beyond it, to the opposing American histories that her parents had tried so hard to overcome. On her mother's side of the family she finds—in carefully preserved documents—the chronicle of a white America both illustrious and shameful. On her father's she discovers, through fragments and shreds of evidence, a no less remarkable history. As she digs deeper into this unwritten half of the story, she reconstructs a longburied family mystery that illuminates her own childhood. In the process, she begins to understand her difficult father, the power and failure of her parents' union, and, finally, the forces of history.

Where Did You Sleep Last Night? is at once a potent statement of personal identity, a challenging look at the murky waters of American ancestry, and an exploration of narratives—the narratives we create and those we forget. Senna has given us an unforgettable testimony to the paradoxes—the pain and the pride—embedded in history, family, and race.

About the Author

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

Discussion Questions

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?

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