



FLATIRON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

# *What You Don't Know* Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *What You Don't Know*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *What You Don't Know*, we respectfully suggest that you consider waiting before reviewing this guide.

1. Did Gloria deserve to be a social pariah? Do you think she felt guilty?
2. What transgressions did Sammie pay for with two fingers? What do you think happened to the missing fingers of the other victims?
3. Why do you think Jacky let Sammie live? Why wouldn't he answer that central question when she interviewed him in prison?
4. Chaney bookends *What You Don't Know* with explicit comparisons to her novel and movies. In what ways would the book be similar to and different from its cinematic version?
5. What was the effect of Chaney's chosen method of narration—limited third person, closely focused through the eyes of several different characters, with intermittent addresses to the reader in second person? Is there anything that you don't get to see, that you don't get to know?
6. Chaney's characters want things and often indulge their desires. Sammie wants to be a big-league reporter, so she sleeps with Hoskins for information, harming her marriage. Loren wants to get into Secondhand's mind, so he dresses like Seever, pushing Hoskins to the mental edge. Hoskins wants to help Trixie and prove to himself that he's a good guy, so he beats up her abuser and gets himself arrested, which possibly makes her situation worse. Seever and Ethan obviously have desires with disastrous consequences upon fulfillment. Can you think of any examples in the book when satiation of desire is a good thing?
7. Are there any sincere relationships in this novel? Loren and Hoskins? Hoskins and his dad, Joe? Hoskins and Ted? Hoskins and Sammie? Sammie and Dean?
8. How is marriage portrayed in the novel? Consider Dean and Sammie, Seever and Gloria. Is love a positive force, or might the love pentagram at the heart of *What You*

*Don't Know*—Sammie surrounded by four men who might love her: Dean, Seever, Hoskins, and Ethan—suggest that love usually has disastrous effects?

9. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes, who (almost exactly) shares his surname with the Secondhand Killer, wrote that life is “solitary, poor, nasty brutish, and short.” What is the view of human nature and of living in this world that Chaney’s work puts forth? Does any innocence survive, or is everyone guilty? Are there any characters held up for you to admire or that you like?
10. How does *What You Don't Know* compare with other psychological thrillers or police procedurals that you’ve read? In what ways might the novel parody the genre? Does this novel start where most crime dramas end, like Secondhand does in relation to Seever?
11. Light and dark are explicitly mentioned throughout the novel. We commonly equate light with goodness and dark with evil. But Jimmy Galen is abducted in broad daylight, the bringing of Seever’s crimes to light enables Secondhand’s serial killing, darkness lets Sammie see into her neighbors’ homes and be soothed by their domesticity, and the dark enables Dean and Sammie to have their most honest conversations. Where else do you see these symbols, and how does Chaney play with the dichotomy?
12. Slipping between boundaries is common in the book; things and people refuse or fail to remain themselves, and appearances are repeatedly misleading. Secondhand becomes Seever. Loren gets into Seever’s clothes, Hoskins into Seever’s mind. People copycat; binaries fray. The successful restaurateur is a serial killer; cops act like criminals, breaking bones like vigilantes; civilians ultimately solve the mysteries of the serial killers’ identities. Is anything in the novel fixed, certain, able to be trusted, or as it should be?
13. In the penultimate chapter, Chaney writes, “You can burn evil, you can cut it and crush it and think it’s gone, but you’ll never be rid of it completely, not really” (page 300). Do you agree? Would it be a wholly positive thing to get rid of evil? What effect might that have on people like Loren and Hoskins?
14. Why do you think Chaney chose to end the novel with a short chapter seen through Jacky’s eyes in a time before the events of the book took place? Does the reader escape these pages? Is it really ever over?