

A WISE book discussion *Big Little Lies* by Lianne Moriarty



Big Little Lies by Lianne Moriarty offers a comprehensive exploration of gender-based violence. The novel and HBO series are both appealing and relevant in current pop culture. The stories are varied, complex, and full of opportunities to reflect. Some themes in the novel emerge for us and we would like to share our WISE thoughts with you.

Characters have very different reactions to violence in the novel. Celeste's babysitter seems to recognize the abuse; Bonnie immediately and physically jumps to Celeste's aid at the party; Madeline regrets not seeing the abuse despite her close friendship with Celeste. Our experiences shape the way we see and think about abuse, and little cues may help or prevent people around us from sharing what they are experiencing. ***How might our own personal experiences influence our reactions?***

Celeste focuses on how she herself contributes to the "conflict" in her relationship and reacts strongly when her therapist points out her lack of control and agency. Often survivors prefer to accept responsibility rather than being considered a victim. ***How can we acknowledge abuse without making a survivor feel helpless and entirely without agency?***

Perry is physically violent in both his sexual assault of Jane and his abuse of his wife. Both women, however, reflect mostly on the terror and lingering impacts from his use of humiliation and degradation. ***What is at the root of wanting to diminish and demean intimate partners?***

Much of the novel focuses on the possibility of violence being biological – that Ziggy perhaps perpetuates violence because his father was violent. In fact, it becomes clear that violence is learned. When Max sees his father using violence against his mother, it becomes normal and acceptable for him to use violence. ***Why do you think it is compelling to suspect that violence might be genetic instead of learned?***

Celeste ultimately decides to leave Perry because she recognizes how his violence affects others – Jane, Amabella, and her own children. ***How does Celeste's story change the way you think about why people do or do not leave abusive partners?***

The novel presents a full spectrum of men and relationships. Often we think about good guys and bad guys, but no one in the book is all good or all bad. Ed, the good guy, blames the victim; Perry, the abusive guy, is also tender and funny; Nathan, the absent dad, is a dedicated father and partner with his new family. ***How can it help to see people and situations as complex and nuanced? How does it affect our ability to recognize unacceptable behavior?***

The novel shows the depth of pain and suffering caused by violence and also demonstrates the full, busy, and even mundane lives that survivors keep living. ***When we see people functioning despite their experiences, does it make it harder to recognize the affects of violence?***

The ending of the book seems semi-unbelievable – the women band together, Ziggy and Jane no longer have to worry about money, the bad guy is gone and no one gets in real trouble. ***What do you think a more realistic ending for the characters would be? What do happy endings look like in real life?***

Would you like a WISE educator to help facilitate a conversation with your book group? Please contact Kate at 603-448-5922 ext. 111 and we can explore these and other thoughts together.