



LIANE MORIARTY

The no. 1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
Big Little Lies and *Nine Perfect Strangers*

READING NOTES





Blurb

From the outside, the Delaneys appear to be an enviably contented family. Even after all these years, former tennis coaches Joy and Stan are still winning tournaments, and now that they've sold the family business they have all the time in the world to learn how to 'relax'. Their four adult children are busy living their own lives, and while it could be argued they never quite achieved their destinies, no-one ever says that out loud.

But now Joy Delaney has disappeared and her children are re-examining their parents' marriage and their family history with fresh, frightened eyes. Is her disappearance related to their mysterious house guest from last year? Or were things never as rosy as they seemed in the Delaney household?

The Author

Liane Moriarty is the Australian author of eight internationally bestselling novels, including the number one *New York Times* bestsellers *The Husband's Secret*, *Big Little Lies* and *Truly Madly Guilty*. Her books have sold more than twenty million copies worldwide, including three million in Australia and New Zealand.

The Husband's Secret was a number one UK bestseller, an Amazon Best Book of 2013 and has been translated into over forty languages. *Big Little Lies* and *Truly Madly Guilty* reached number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list in their first week of publication – the first time this has been achieved by an Australian – with *Nine Perfect Strangers* going straight to number one in Australia on publication, breaking sales records of the time. Liane is also the author of the Space Brigade series for children. She lives in Sydney with her husband, son and daughter.



Plot Summary

WARNING: SPOILERS AHEAD!

Joy and Stan Delaney have recently retired from a long and rewarding career running a successful tennis academy after being teenage tennis champions themselves. Their four children, Amy, Logan, Troy and Brooke, all high-performing tennis players in their own right, are now adults who have left competitive tennis behind them.

The book opens in February 2020, when Joy Delaney leaves a garbled text message on her children's phones seeming to announce she is going 'off-grid', and then disappears. At first, the family is not terribly worried, but when no one has heard from Joy a week later, and her mobile phone is found under her bed, two of the children decide to report her missing.

Suspicion falls immediately on Stan, who admits that he and Joy argued on the morning of the day Joy went missing but won't say what about. The children are more open with the police, and mention a series of events that happened six months earlier that might have some bearing on Joy's disappearance.

In early September, a young woman named Savannah, a stranger to Joy and Stan, knocked on their door asking for help. Claiming to be the victim of domestic violence, Joy and Stan took her in and gave her a bed for the night. One night turned into several, and then it seemed Savannah was staying with Joy and Stan indefinitely, paying her way by helping with the cooking and housekeeping.

The Delaney children were suspicious of this arrangement, which caused friction between them and Joy. However their fears were realised when, after a short spell in hospital for Joy, Savannah blackmailed Troy, claiming that Stan sexually harassed her when they were alone in the house and that she expected to be paid for her silence. Troy, for whom money is no object, paid her off before approaching Stan with the allegation. Stan vehemently denied it and Joy believed him, bringing to an end the seemingly harmonious arrangement they had with Savannah. They asked her to leave and she did, but not before two explosive pieces of information came to light.

Firstly, an old photo album of Savannah's revealed her true identity: she is no stranger to the Delaneys. She is, in fact, the younger sister of Harry Haddad, Stan's former star pupil and the only one who made it on the world stage. She had met them all only once, but had been treated cruelly by them and had never forgotten it. The second piece of information, revealed by Savannah herself, was that it was Joy who advised Harry's father Elias to leave Delaneys Tennis Academy and take his son elsewhere. Stan could not comprehend this betrayal by Joy – the loss of his one chance at coaching a world champion – and as Savannah leaves, the two drift apart.

Eventually, the details of Savannah's involvement with the family are made known to the police, which, along with other seemingly incriminating evidence, lead them to zero in on Stan as being



the one likely responsible for Joy's disappearance. But as the police arrive at the house to arrest him for her murder, Joy arrives home alive and well, to explain that she has been doing a charity off-grid challenge with Savannah the whole time.

Joy's disappearance led to much soul-searching from all the characters. Having her back throws both past and recent events into sharp relief, and allows all the characters to focus on what is important to them in their lives.

1. The title of the novel is a reference to the adage, 'The apple never falls far from the tree', an expression that is often used to suggest that a child grows up to be similar to its parents, both in behaviour and in physical characteristics. In what way does the expression apply to the Delaney family, and Savannah, Harry Haddad and their parents?

Themes

Marriage and relationships

There are several marriages and relationships depicted in the novel, both successful and failed.

2. What do the marriages and relationships in the novel have in common, and where do they differ? Why do you think each marriage works (or doesn't), and where might each fall down?
3. '*... but when Stan was gone, he was gone, and if she thought about that too much and all it implied she could tap into a great well of rage, so she didn't think about it. That was the secret of a happy marriage: step away from the rage.*' (page 34) Do you agree with Joy? Is this the secret to a happy marriage? Why or why not?
4. Christina's parents' marriage ended over her father's refusal to wash a plate. '*He never understood what that plate represented: Disrespect. Disregard. Contempt . . . Or was she projecting her own unconscious biases? She never saw her parents argue about housework either, and yet that plate on the sink ended their marriage. He just ignores me, Christina. I ask so nicely and he just ignores me. No-one was too old or well mannered for the sudden snap of rage.*' (page 95) Did you relate to Joy's rage about the housework, or Christina's mother's rage? What long-standing social currents run through many modern marriages and relationships, even now?
5. '*You couldn't share the truth of your marriage with your adult children. They didn't really want to know, even if they thought they did.*' (page 159) Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How has your view of your own parents' marriage changed and evolved over the years since your childhood? Have you ever spoken to your parents about their relationship and perhaps been surprised by new revelations?



6. *'That's what happened. You had a long streak where you felt like you couldn't lose a point, until you did . . . Sometimes it felt like their relationship ebbed and flowed over a day, or even a conversation. She could feel affection followed by resentment in the space of ten minutes.'* (page 160) Do you agree with Joy here? Is this what long-term relationships are like, in your experience?

7. *'She said, "You don't have to say you're sorry," because he didn't. If they started saying sorry, where would it begin and where would it end?'* (page 193) What does Joy mean here? Do you think this attitude shines a light on one of the reasons Joy's and Stan's marriage is ultimately successful?

8. *'When the police interviewed [Caro] she'd told them that her neighbours were a nice ordinary happily married couple. This was absolutely true and absolutely not true. There was no such thing as a nice ordinary happily married couple.'* (page 334) What does Caro mean here? Is she right, do you think?

Parenthood

9. Joy feels a searing guilt over the way she handled Brooke's migraines when Brooke was a child. In what ways is she compensating for it now?

10. Joy felt that much was compromised by trying to run the business and be a mother to four children. At one point she says: *'If her children ever had children they might at least have an inkling of how Joy had staggered beneath the weight of her responsibilities through those difficult years.'* (page 349) And later: *'Surely Joy's clever granddaughter would know how to have it all without actually doing it all.'* (page 460) This is a story we hear more often than ever from women today. Is it really possible to 'have it all'? If so, under what circumstances?

11. *'[Savannah] saw only the respectable present, not the complicated past.'* (page 79) This is a lovely phrase. Do you think it's applicable to most families? Why or why not?

12. *'When [Joy] looked at photos of her children when they were little, she sometimes thought, Did I notice how beautiful they were? Was I actually there? Did I just skim the surface of my entire damned life?'* (pages 102–103) Do you relate to what Joy says here?

13. *'The children had all the power now [as adults].'* (page 193) What does Joy mean by this? Is it true, do you think? How does the power balance shift and change as children grow up?

14. *'[Joy] felt fond of Savannah but she didn't adore her in the fierce, complex way she loved her daughters, which meant, paradoxically, that she could spend three weeks with her no problem at all.'* (page 458) Does this statement resonate with you? Why or why not?

15. Joy and Stan parent their children in very different ways. Discuss some of these, and their effectiveness or lack thereof. How much influence do you think societal norms had on the roles Stan and Joy played in their children's youth?



Domestic violence and abuse

16. *‘Stan said, “Our girls are athletes, and they grew up with brothers. They’d never put up with [domestic violence].” “I don’t think it works like that,” said Joy. “It starts out small. You put up with little things in a relationship and then . . . the little things gradually get bigger.”’* (page 36) What do you think about these statements? Who do you think is right, and why?

17. *‘People here were too young and happy, attractive and cashed-up to hit their girlfriends.’* (page 123) There is a prevailing notion that wealthy people don’t abuse their partners. Why do you think that is? What dangers are there in such an assumption?

18. *‘For the first time in her sixty-nine years [Joy] felt the fear: the fear every woman knows is always waiting for her, the possibility that lurks and scuttles in the shadows of her mind, even if she’s spent her entire life being so tenderly loved and protected by good men.’* (page 405) Do you agree that this fear is universal for women? Discuss some of the fears women typically have that men may not have, or may be unaware of.

19. *‘It was always possible to plant doubt. Most men carried the guilt of their gender. You just had to apply a tiny flame to the kindling.’* (page 332) Savannah uses a story about domestic violence to engender sympathy and pity in Joy and Stan, and then invents a story about sexual harassment to blackmail Troy. What do you think about this? Why do you think this strategy works for Savannah, in both cases, even though neither story is true?

20. Stan’s father is ‘kicked to the kerb’ after he throws his wife across the room in a clear case of domestic violence. However it could be said that Stan’s mother is also guilty of domestic abuse. In what ways was her relationship with Stan’s father and Stan himself abusive?

Childhood/youth

21. *‘It happened all the time. Talented kids turned into ordinary grown-ups: butterflies became moths.’* (page 307) What do you think of this statement? Do you think it’s true? Do you think it’s better for children to have had an experience of success and failure the way the Delaney children did with tennis, or do you think it sets them up for disappointment? How has their childhood experience affected the four Delaney children?

22. *‘. . . young people weren’t patient with strangeness, they wanted clear-cut explanations for everything, including exactly why people behaved the way they did. They hadn’t yet learned that sometimes there were no answers.’* (pages 260–261) Do you agree with this? Do you think this is an example of the adage ‘with old age comes wisdom’?

23. *‘They’d been so young, with no idea of their youth or beauty.’* (page 271) Is this ignorance a blessing or a curse for young people, do you think? Or both?



Gender issues

24. *‘[Indira] had issues with her body. [Logan] loved her body but he had to be meticulously careful about what he said. Indira preferred to pretend she didn’t have a body at all. In the beginning he used to compliment her, and she’d turn on him: You’re lying, you’re just saying that, how could you say that, I know you don’t mean that, my legs are revolting, my arms are disgusting. Suddenly he would find himself in the position of defending her body against a cruel attacker, and he didn’t know how long or how vigorously he was meant to fight back when she was that attacker, so eventually he surrendered. He stopped saying anything at all. Every relationship has its quixotic rules.’* (page 222) Do you relate to this? What was Logan supposed to do?

25. *‘Women awarded extra points for self-confidence. Men weren’t as generous with their marking.’* (page 311) Is this a pattern you recognise? If yes, why do you think this is so?

26. *‘When the children were little they always called it “Daddy’s office” even though Joy was the one who handled all the business of the business. Yet they all had to maintain the pretence that because Stan was the man, whatever he was doing was automatically more important and deserved priority over any contribution from the little lady.’* (page 395) Similarly, what about the fact that Christina says at one stage that Joy ‘helped’ to run the tennis school, rather than that she actually co-ran it? A similar attitude is evident with Brooke and Grant, when Brooke offers to give up her practice to help their marriage. Why do you think women often accede professional dominance to men?

Human nature and societal norms

27. *‘Caro knew retirement could be stressful. No routine. Just the two of you stuck in your home, stuck in your aging bodies. An argument over a damp towel left on the bed could last for days and then it often turned out that the argument was not about the damp towel at all but about something hurtful that was said thirty years ago and your feelings about your in-laws.’* (page 335) How has retirement affected Joy and Stan? What are the benefits and pitfalls of retirement generally, do you think?

28. *‘What was the harm in it? Why not rewrite the memory and remember it as a perfect day? What was the actual benefit of accuracy when it came to memories? What would her dear sweet little memoir-writing teacher have to say about that?’* (page 165) Do you agree with Joy? Does social media play a part in the reconstruction of memories these days, do you think?

29. *‘I was being silly, I don’t really hate cooking. I just like it when someone else puts a meal in front of me, as if I’m the lady of the manor!’* (page 103) Many characters have this idea that to have someone else do something for them is elitist. Do you agree? Is this a prevalent idea in Australian society? Why or why not?



30. Joy describes herself and Stan as being entirely different people from who they were in 1974, and also exactly the same (page 464). Do you think this is possible/true? In what ways?

31. *‘[Joy] would find herself thinking about all the women who assumed their lives were just like hers, far too ordinary to end in newsworthy violence and yet they had, and all the ordinary people, just like her and Stan, who had been planning “active retirements” and whose lives were now ending cruelly, abruptly and far too soon.’* (page 464–65) COVID-19 had a profound effect on global society in 2020 and beyond. How does it influence this story, and Joy’s thinking in the latter chapters? Joy also refers to Polly Perkins here, who was murdered by her controlling husband. Is it just human nature to assume bad things won’t happen to you, or were there red flags that should have been noticed in Polly’s case? Why weren’t they noticed at the time, do you think?

Forgiveness

32. *‘She had learned, when her mother was missing, that it was possible to simultaneously hold antithetical beliefs. She had existed in the centre of a Venn diagram. She loved her father. She loved her mother. If her father had been responsible for her mother’s death, she would have stood by him. She knew she was the only one of her siblings who had stared directly at the solar eclipse of this possibility.’* (page 468)

‘She saw a woman furiously scolding her for her behaviour, but then moving on, as if it was possible for even the most terrible of actions to be forgiven.’ (page 485)

How do you think you would react if you found yourself in the same position as the Delaney children? Think about your siblings and how the family dynamics would play out if a parent went missing. Would you think either of your parents was capable of murder? Could you forgive? Are some actions so terrible they are simple unforgiveable? Or are there certain people you love so unconditionally you know you could forgive them for anything? Would it be different, for example, if it were your child rather than your parent?



Characters

Joy Delaney

33. ‘. . . but [Joy’s] dreams didn’t have the same ferocious entitlement as Stan’s, because she was a woman, and women know that babies and husbands and sick parents can derail your dreams, at any moment they can drag you from your bed, they can forestall your career, they can lift you from your prized seat at Wimbledon from a match later described as “epic”.’ (page 192) Much of Joy’s anger, regret and resentment stems from the conflict between her personal and professional lives, throughout her life. Savannah’s arrival allows her to see the past from a new perspective for the first time. What sparks this, do you think? In general, are expectations different for women and men? If yes, in what ways? And do you think that is changing?

34. ‘She’d never wanted his gratitude, just his acknowledgement. Just once. Because otherwise, what had been the point of her entire life? Of all those lamb chops she’d grilled? Of all that spaghetti bolognaise? My God, she despised spaghetti bolognaise. Night after night after night, plate after plate after plate. The laundry, the ironing, the mopping, the sweeping, the driving. She’d never resented it at the time but now she resented every moment, every single bloody lamb chop.’ (page 403) Do you think this is a common experience for women, especially women around Joy’s age? Have things changed? Do you think Stan was aware of this need in Joy for his acknowledgement, and if not, why not?

35. ‘It was secret petty marital point-scoring . . .’ (page 460) Do you think what Joy did to Stan by advising Elias Haddad to take Harry elsewhere was petty, or true, or both? What would you have done in Joy’s situation?

36. ‘For the first time in decades [Joy] stopped. She thought she’d stopped when she and Stan retired, but she hadn’t stopped at all. She’d kept on running hopelessly towards some unspecified, unattainable goal.’ (page 459) What effect did retirement have on Joy? Do you think this happens often when people retire? Do you think this altered state of being made Joy more susceptible to Savannah’s scheme? What was it about the situation with Savannah and the off-grid challenge that really made Joy ‘stop’?

Stan Delaney

37. Joy’s reaction to Stan’s strategy of ‘leaving’ – walking away from conflict, especially as the instances become more extreme – is rage. When she tries to talk to him about it, he rebuffs her. What do you think about it? How, if at all, does your reaction to this coping mechanism of Stan’s change over the course of the novel?

38. ‘Each time she fell out of love with him, [Stan] saw it happen and waited it out. He never stopped loving her, even those times when he felt deeply hurt and betrayed by her, even in that bad year when they talked about separating, he’d just gone along with it, waiting for



her to come back to him, thanking God and his dad up above each time she did.' (page 476)

What do you think of Stan's approach to marriage? Could Stan have approached his marriage differently? Do you think what Stan describes is the way in most marriages, or not?

Savannah

39. Do your feelings towards Savannah change throughout the book? Do you think her childhood experiences explain or even justify her behaviour as an adult? How does knowledge of Savannah's childhood trauma colour your view of her actions as an adult?

40. Why do you think Joy continues to feel sympathy for Savannah even when she knows what Savannah has done to her family? What qualities does Savannah have that appeal to Joy?

Amy, Logan, Troy and Brooke

41. *'When [Troy] was a kid all he'd wanted to do was beat his older brother, in anything and everything. It was the point of his entire existence.'* (pages 126–127) . . . *'Now Logan competed against Troy by not competing, which was fucking genius. You couldn't win if only one of you was playing.'* (page 122) How has their childhood rivalry shaped the men Logan and Troy have become, do you think? How has their birth order influenced this? How has your position in your own family influenced your own personality and life choices?

42. *'But then a university friend got diagnosed with depression and described it to Brooke as a kind of half-paralysis, as if all her muscles had atrophied, and Brooke had a sudden memory of Amy eating cereal in slow motion, swaying slowly like seaweed under water, and she realised she was offering this friend more sympathy and understanding than she'd ever given her own sister. These days she tried hard to see Amy with objective, compassionate eyes, but it was hard, because this was still her big sister, her bossy, charismatic sister, who used to call Brooke her "peasant".'* (page 185) Why do you think it is that sometimes we're more compassionate to our friends than our family?

43. *'They all looked at Troy, waiting for his answer, staunchly on his side in spite of their sniping, in spite of his past mistakes, suddenly, mysteriously, as close as siblings could be.'* (page 375) Is this on-again, off-again loyalty the way most siblings are, in your experience?

44. *'[Amy] said this with the cheerful, childish disdain with which siblings often spoke about each other. Roger had a client who was an extremely well-spoken university lecturer, except for when she talked about her older sister, when she morphed into a freckled, pigtailed kid: "My sister gets everything, Roger."'* (page 380) Why are sibling rivalries and relationships so resistant to change? What is your experience with your siblings, if you have any?

45. Amy is the only one of the Delaney children to show a degree of sympathy and understanding towards Savannah. What is it about Amy's personality and life experiences that might explain this kinder approach?



46. *‘Whenever there was conflict in [Logan’s] relationships he took immense care not to repeat the mistakes of the past.’* (page 229) Logan’s grandfather made one terrible ‘mistake’ and paid for it with the loss of his marriage and family. In his attempts not to make the same mistake, Stan developed the habit of walking away from conflict. What does Logan do to deal with conflict? Is there a pattern playing out down the generations, do you think?

47. What do you think it is about Troy that made him self-sabotage his marriage to Claire? He claims not to understand why he did it, but do you think there were signs in the child he was, and the upbringing he had, which might suggest some reasons?

Setting

48. The present-day events in the novel take place in Sydney during the bushfires of 2019–2020 and the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In what ways does the author use this particular time period as a backdrop to the novel?

Writing Style

49. Liane Moriarty has chosen to tell this story in the third person through the eyes of all the major characters in turn, while switching between the events of September/October 2019 and ‘now’, which is approximately February and March 2020. What is the effect of this writing style? How does it shape the reader’s understanding of the characters themselves as we piece together what happened six months ago, and what is happening ‘now’?

50. What techniques does Liane Moriarty use to distinguish between the different character voices in the novel? How does this influence how we feel about and relate to those characters?