

THE GIRL WHO SLEPT WITH GOD

Reading Guide

Jory Quanbeck used to know her place in the world. The daughter of evangelical Christians, Jory knew she would never be as devout as her older sister, Grace. Like Grace, Jory dutifully abides by Esther and Oren Quanbeck's stringent rules, but the thirteen-year-old is curious about her changing body and the worldly temptations beyond her reach. Then Grace unexpectedly disgraces the family, setting both sisters adrift and blurring their once black-and-white moral landscape.

When Grace was seven years old, two missionaries—recently returned from Swaziland—spoke at the Quanbeck's church. Grace “knew right then that I was being called by God to be a foreign missionary” (p. 55). Ten years later, Grace fulfills her dream, spending a summer in rural Mexico spreading God's word. No one imagined that Grace would return to Idaho pregnant, claiming to have been chosen by God to bear His child.

While Grace is away, Jory discovers new worlds at home. The Hewitts, a neighboring family, hire her to babysit their daughter. It's the first money Jory can call her own, and exploring Mrs. Hewitt's lingerie drawer and Mr. Hewitt's girly magazines awakens a host of exciting—and unsettling—new feelings.

Then Jory meets Grip, the town's new ice cream truck man. Scruffy, tattooed, and mysteriously alluring, Grip isn't like anyone she's met at church or at Arco Christian Academy. Despite being an adult, he gives Jory his undivided attention and seems to understand her in a way that her parents never have.

Educated at Harvard, Oren Quanbeck teaches astronomy at the local Bible college. For him, science and religion are not at odds. He deeply believes that “the enormous complexity of the cosmos together with the marvelous harmony of reality bear witness to the plausibility of a creator” (p. 34). His beliefs about God, bland wholesome foods, and modesty in all things form the bedrock of their family life.

Esther Quanbeck joined the church when she married Oren, but she is no longer the slim, happy young woman Jory sees in old photographs. “It made Jory both angry and dismayed to think that her and her sisters' introduction into the world had effected this transformation” (p. 18). Grace's pregnancy pushes Esther to the brink, and she soothes herself with an endless stream of “headache pills” (p. 62).

Hoping to restore peace, Oren moves Grace and Jory out of the family home to live alone on the other side of town. Jory transfers to the nearby secular high school, where the girls are allowed to wear pants and getting drunk is part of growing up. What Oren doesn't foresee is that his two daughters—along with Grip and their elderly neighbor Mrs. Kleinfelter—will forge a makeshift family of their own.

Set in 1970 and illuminating the social upheaval of the era, *The Girl Who Slept with God* offers both a profound exploration of faith and family, as well as a heart-wrenching coming-of-age tale. Val Breilinski's stunning debut novel will resonate with readers long after the final page.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. What does Grace's interaction with the Reisensteins—the Quanbecks' Jewish neighbors—tell you about her?
2. Would you say that the Quanbecks had a happy family life before the summer of 1970?
3. If Grace hadn't become pregnant, how do you imagine Esther and Oren would have handled Jory's budding sexuality?
4. Do you think that Esther and Oren ever considered the possibility that Grace was telling the truth about her pregnancy? Would you?
5. Midway through the novel, Jory lies about starting her first menstrual cycle. Later, it actually does begin. What is the significance of these two incidents?
6. Jory comes to rely upon Mrs. Kleinfelter, who helps the two sisters and becomes like a grandmother to them. Does Mrs. Kleinfelter also benefit from helping Jory and Grace?
7. How did your opinion of Grip change over the course of the novel? Is he a predator?
8. At the beginning of *The Girl Who Slept with God*, Jory often feels overshadowed by her older sister's inflexible and unwavering piety. Grace, in turn, seems almost to ignore Jory. How does the relationship between the two sisters evolve over the course of the novel? Is their dynamic largely a result of birth order or of Jory's and Grace's respective religious beliefs?

Spoiler Warning: Don't Read Further if You Don't Want to Know What Happens

9. If Jory had met Laird before Grip, might some of the novel's later tragedies been averted? Or would Grip have displaced the teenager in Jory's romantic imagination?
10. Would Grip have initiated a sexual relationship with Jory if Grace hadn't entered the picture? At seventeen, was Grace old enough to become involved with Grip?

11. Does knowing that she'd been raped cause Grace to lose her faith in God? Or did the knowledge simply force her to accept the possibility that her beliefs weren't, after all, absolute?

12. Might Grace have been happy with Grip if they had succeeded in escaping together? What are the similarities and differences between Grace and Anneliese, the pregnant hippie at Hope House?

13. Was Esther's breakdown and separation from Oren inevitable? Will her decision to move to Los Angeles ultimately shield Frances from the worst of the fallout?

14. What would happen to Oren if Jory chose to live with Mrs. Kleinfelter? If you were Jory, could you forgive Oren for the decisions he made?

15. At the end of the novel, Grip blames Oren for what happened to Grace, whereas Jory blames herself for betraying them to her father, and Oren believes it was Grace's own inflexibility that led her to kill herself. Was any one person culpable for what happened?

16. Are some wounds too deep to heal? What do you think will happen to Jory and Oren?

About this Author

Val Breliniski was born and raised in Nampa, Idaho, the daughter of devout evangelical Christians. From 2003 to 2005, she was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, where she was also a Jones Lecturer in fiction writing. She received an MFA from the University of Virginia, and her recent writing has been featured in *VQR* and *The Rumpus*. She received prizes for her fiction from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Charlottesville Weekly*, and *The Boise Weekly*, and was also a finalist for the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award. Val lives in Northern California and currently teaches creative writing at Stanford's Continuing Studies Program.

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