

"A novel about two sisters you will never forget...
Our Little World will transport and transfix you."
—ELIN HILDERBRAND

Our Little World

Karen Winn



Book Club Kit

Dear Reader,

With this novel, I set out to tell a story about sisters and secrets. I wanted to portray the intimacy of sisterhood, with which I am familiar, and the friction created from both internal and external forces that often underlies such close relationships. I also wanted to explore the reverberations of tragedy amid small-town dynamics. The novel's setting, Hammend, is a fictionalized version (and anagram) of the small New Jersey town where I grew up: Mendham, which has a population of 5,000. It's a place where innocence largely reigns. However, as I've grown older, I've become fascinated with the dark undercurrents of life—the notion that everything could change, at a moment's notice.

The starting point for the novel came from an incident that occurred when I was younger and swimming at the local lake. My mother couldn't find me, as I loved to swim underwater for long periods of time, so she panicked and alerted the lifeguard. When I came up for air, I noticed swimmers were exiting the lake—though I wasn't sure why. I followed them and spotted my frantic mother standing with the lifeguard, who was nervously pointing out other children and asking, "Is this her?" That incident has always stayed with me, and it seemed like a powerful starting point for a story: What if I—or someone else—had gone missing that day?

This novel is also a love letter to the '80s. A fair amount of research was required to seep this novel in an authentic version of that time, from determining period-appropriate house décor to available medical treatments to the cultural zeitgeist. From a creative standpoint, once I was able to fully visualize the era, it allowed me to place the characters within the scenes and explore the complexities of their relationships.

I sincerely hope that you have connected with this story and that Bee's tender and emotional journey resonated with you. Thank you for reading *Our Little World*.

Sincerely,
Karen Winn

Discussion Questions

1. We learn from the first chapter that both Sally and Audrina have died. How do you think your experience with the story would have differed if you hadn't known about their deaths until they happened?
2. In many ways, *Our Little World* is a novel about innocence lost. It's easy to point to the bigger moments of the story—the deaths, the secrets—and say that's when it happened. But how does Bee's coming-of-age start gradually? How do smaller events and more mundane occurrences start to shift her perspective even before these world-shattering events?
3. Bee and Audrina's tempestuous relationship is central to the book. Bee feels constantly compared to Audrina and thinks that she is found lacking. They fight and make up often throughout the story. Did this representation of growing up with siblings resonate with you? Why or why not?
4. How do you think the small-town setting of Hammend contributed to the events of the story?
5. We're told that Bee hates her given name, Borka, which was the name of her father's aunt who died from a brain aneurysm. How does Bee's rejection of the name, and with it, a part of her family's Hungarian heritage, reflect the world around her, as a child in a small town in the 1980s?
6. Bee's jealousy and longing for recognition can, at times, cause her to make mistakes or unintentionally hurt other people. In hindsight, she often feels deeply ashamed of her actions. Later, she even tells her therapist that she feels responsible for Audrina's death. Do you think Bee's self-blame is reasonable? Should she forgive herself?
7. If Bee had turned in the bracelet to the police the day she found it, do you think the events of the story would have changed? Why or why not?
8. After Sally's disappearance, Bee talks about her and Audrina's world as being literally small because they were kept inside where it was just the two of them. How was the world around them also a "little world" in some respects? How did the shared naïveté of the town mirror the girls' experience?
9. Bee describes a conversation with her father in which she asks him to translate a Hungarian phrase, which means, "Even a white lily can cast a black shadow." What larger meaning do you think this line has in the context of the story?
10. Later in the book, we learn more about what Audrina was thinking from her diary. How did this shift your perspective of Audrina? How does the diary serve as a framing device for the latter parts of the book?
11. From Bee and Audrina's experiences with diabetes and trichotillomania, to the way the search for Sally is carried out, much of the plot is rooted in its 1980s setting. How might this story be different if it took place today? How did this modern lens affect how you saw the characters as you were reading?
12. Why do you think Bee's father and Mrs. Baker were drawn to each other?
13. If Audrina hadn't died that day in the library and instead lived to be an adult, how do you think her relationship would be with Bee today?

Research and Resources

SPOILER ALERT: IF YOU HAVEN'T YET READ THE NOVEL, THIS PAGE CONTAINS SPOILERS

Our Little World deals with a range of complex issues, from medical conditions to missing children. It required a fair amount of research to create an authentic mid-'80s setting and to accurately depict these topics. Here's an inside look at some of this research, as well as helpful resources for those wanting to learn more:

TYPE 1 DIABETES:

Having worked as a registered nurse for a number of years, as well as a nurse practitioner, I understand how a chronic illness can shape an individual and affect the entire family. When Audrina develops type 1 diabetes, she becomes vulnerable and the recipient of attention she does not want, and the dynamics in her family shift in a number of ways as everyone tries to come to terms with both the daily and long-term implications. I drew on my own experience caring for many diabetes patients but also did research to contextualize this disease in the 1980s. Back then, the landscape for the management of type 1 diabetes was different: the testing and monitoring capabilities were more rudimentary, not as precise, and the treatment options much more limited. Fortunately, today there are medical advances and much more support for those with type 1 diabetes.

The American Diabetes Association is a great resource: www.diabetes.org/diabetes/type-1

TRICHOTILLOMANIA:

I used trichotillomania to serve as a physical manifestation of Bee's inner turmoil over Sally's disappearance and the guilt she harbored about taking the bracelet. As mentioned in the novel, trichotillomania was first recognized in 1987 in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Initially classified as an impulse control disorder, it is now considered an obsessive-compulsive related disorder. Its exact cause is not known but may result from a combination of genetic and environmental factors. For this research, I read through personal experiences and also gathered medical information.

For those seeking support and more information about trichotillomania, please see: www.bfrb.org/storage/documents/Expert_Consensus_Treatment_Guidelines_2016w.pdf.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE:

Max's mom, Mrs. Baker, is a nurse with substance use disorder. Research suggests that nurses have a higher prevalence of substance abuse than the general population, which may be due to stressful working environments, easy access to controlled drugs, and variable working hours. Before the 1980s, the boards of nursing often took disciplinary action against nurses with substance abuse, but today there are non-disciplinary programs that incorporate rehabilitation and treatment, allowing a nurse to recover and maintain licensure, and return to work once safety to practice is established and confirmed.

For nurses seeking support and information on substance use disorders, please see: www.americanaddictioncenters.org/healthcare-professionals/rehab-for-nurses

For those seeking support and information on substance use disorders, please see: www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

MISSING CHILDREN:

I dove deep into the topic of missing children of the 1980s. In the early '80s, no infrastructure existed to help locate such children (or track, even), so these cases (of which there were therefore an unknown number) were handled by local law enforcement. Stranger danger panic began to spread across the nation in the '80s when the media detailed high-profile missing child cases such as Etan Patz and Adam Walsh. By 1984, the Missing Children's Assistance Act had been passed, which led to the creation of a national resource center and clearing house of computerized information to help parents and local law enforcement track missing children, as well as a national 24-hour toll-free line for people to report. Also in 1984, the faces of missing children began to appear on milk cartons. When Sally Baker went missing in June of 1985, all of this was relatively nascent, and I drew on the 1987 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) document "Investigator's Guide to Missing Child Cases For Law-Enforcement Officers Locating Missing Children" to help frame my thinking about how Sally Baker's case would have been handled.

Here is that article, as well as some others I relied on for research:

www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/108768NCJRS.pdf

www.nytimes.com/1982/10/13/us/bill-on-missing-children-signed-by-president.html

www.newsweek.com/stranger-things-missing-children-netflix-488605

www.nationalchildsafetycouncil.org/about/missing-children-efforts/228-missing-children-milk-carton-program

To learn more information about this topic, visit www.missingkids.org/home.

HUNGARY:

Similar to Bee's father, my father was a Hungarian refugee who came to the United States after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (however, this is where similarities between the two end). Unfortunately, my father passed away from cancer in 2010, so I turned to the internet to read about this historic day in Budapest, and used this research to inform the creation of Bee's father:

www.history.com/this-day-in-history/soviets-put-brutal-end-to-hungarian-revolution

www.nytimes.com/1993/03/25/world/russian-papers-shed-little-light-on-hungary.html

POP CULTURE:

A more lighthearted topic I researched was '80s pop culture! I googled popular sayings, foods, and fashion from that era. I dusted off my old yearbooks from grade school and high school, and I also consulted my old sixth-grade diary to help me get a feel for what preteen girls would care about and write about. I rewatched some '80s classic movies like *Heathers*, *The Goonies*, *Stand by Me*, *Troop Beverly Hills*, *Back to the Future*, *Big*, among others. I listened to a ton of '80s music. On eBay, I bought a 1983 *Better Homes and Gardens* book to help me visualize the interior house décor from that time. Here are a couple of the websites I visited for my '80s pop culture search:

www.thegreat80s.com/80s-Pop-Culture.html

www.inthe1980s.com/80s-slang-phrases/

Setting Inspiration & Information



THE TOWN OF HAMMEND is a fictionalized version—and anagram—of [Mendham, New Jersey](#), where I grew up. Similar to Bee and Audrina, my siblings and I played kickball on the cul-de-sac with the neighborhood kids.

DEER CHASE LAKE is based on a real lake: [Sunrise Lake](#), located at the Lewis Morris County Park in Morris Township, New Jersey. I named it “Deer Chase” after the road in Morristown, New Jersey, where I was born.





MORTENSON'S DRUG STORE
is based on [Robinson Drug store](#)
in Mendham.

**HAMMEND'S TENNIS
& SWIM CLUB**
is based on [Mendham's
Racquet Club](#),
where my siblings and
I used to spend
our summer days.



HAMMEND'S FOODTOWN (and shopping center)
is based on Mendham's Foodtown (now King's) and shopping center.



THE LIBRARY IN HAMMEND is based on [Mendham Borough Library](#).



I took the name **HILLSIDE JUNIOR HIGH** from Hilltop Elementary School in Mendham, where I attended second and third grade.

THE TOWN OF ETCHERS is an anagram of the town of Chester (although, in the novel, Etchers is not geographically positioned as Chester).

WICKE FARM is a fictional farm, but I took the name "Wicke" from "Tempe Wick."

MERRIS COUNTY is based on Morris County.

Calendars used as reference for the book

