



The Underneath

a novel

MELANIE FINN

Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Kay's daring and independent life as a war reporter has given way to a claustrophobic domesticity. While her husband, Michael, is away in foreign parts, Kay is home with dishes, her children and a book she's starting to realize will never be written. On p. 100, she wonders: "Did other women feel like this about their children—the sharp rush of resentment?" How does Kay's ambivalence play into her increasing obsession with the farm house and the fate of its occupants?
2. Kay has been obsessed with stories before. She takes a risky journey, while pregnant, to meet with a notorious African warlord, General Christmas. How did she make you feel about her?
3. Why does Ben offer to help Shevaunne and her son, Jake? Is he clear, himself, about his motivations?
4. On p. 130, Kay begins to question her own version of her narrative. She shifts from a version of the boy-with-the-bucket story that shows her in a favorable light to one that reveals her as callous. What does this tell us about her? Knowing this, how do you feel about her? She also alters the narrative of story of her rescue by General Christmas in his helicopter on pages 280–282. Why is she doing this? And which version do you believe is the truth?
5. When Kay finally meets General Christmas, they discuss the nature of evil. On p 208, when he challenges her that evil is circumstantial, she refutes him, saying she could never commit the kind of atrocities he has. He replies: "I'm disappointed in your lack of imagination, Kay. You want to understand? Then imagine. You are in a different world to my world, Kay, a gated community, a real passport. You don't know, you haven't the faintest idea what you would do in my situation. Your innocence is just a failure of imagination." To what extent to you agree with him? Or her? Is evil intrinsic or circumstantial? Could any one of us become a General Christmas, given the right (or wrong) circumstances?



6. Ben encountered neglect and terrible cruelty as child. Kay reads about such cases in the local Vermont paper, *The Caledonian Record*. Unlike General Christmas, who is a remote figure, the perpetrators Ben encounters—and Kay reads about—are members of small communities. They are familiar. Circle back to question 5.
7. Kay, herself, crosses a line. On page 181, she verbally abuses Freya. How does she react? Did you find this scene believable? Why/not?
8. Ben's history with Frank emerges, and we glimpse the tyranny of Ammon. How is Ammon like General Christmas?
9. Vermont has a highly romanticized image—red barns, grazing cows, fall colors. But the author shows us a different “underneath” reality of drug abuse, poverty, and violence. How is the landscape a metaphor for motherhood?
10. On page 314, in the midst of a tense and potentially fatal scene, Ben notes, “A dozen small birds flock across the water—he can't be sure from here, but perhaps they are cedar waxwings. They move the air with their wings, and he feels the current all the way here.” In this moment, Ben is facing a life-or-death choice. What does he choose, and why? And what part do the birds play in his decision?

