



READING GUIDE

BEST GIRL SYLVIA MAULTASH WARSH

Reading level: 2.6

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, family relationships, loyalty, ambition

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Summary

Twenty-three-year-old Amanda Moss has a flair for style, a way with hair, and a rock ‘n’ roll heart. Trained in hairstyling by her adoptive mother, Shelley, Amanda makes a steady living cutting, coloring and styling hair in a Yorkville salon. Unwilling to put her trust in other people, Amanda mostly keeps to herself. Despite her oil-and-water relationship with Shelley, the two stay in close contact even after Amanda moves into her own place.

Until recently, Amanda has understood her heritage in fairly straightforward terms: parents killed in a car accident when she was three; adopted by Shelley and her husband; forced to learn piano and other requisite rites of childhood. At least, that’s what her adoptive mother, Shelley, has always told her.

But when a woman by the name of Diane calls to inform Amanda that her mother has just died—in prison—the young woman is suddenly forced to reevaluate everything she’s ever been led to believe. Diane visits, and brings Amanda things that once belonged to her birth mother, Carol: a journal; notes from the other women in prison; photographs of Amanda as a baby with both of her biological parents. Through Diane, Amanda learns her mother died while serving a life sentence for the murder of her husband, Freddy Allan, Amanda’s father.

Reeling, Amanda searches for more information about both of her parents. She learns her father once played in a band of some local repute—and that her mother’s lawyer believed Carol to be innocent. Determined to set the record straight, Amanda chases every lead in a twenty-year-old murder case in order to free her mother in death from the wrongful blame she carried in life. She crisscrosses the city to speak with people—Iggy Bosco, her father’s ex-bandmate; Stu Van Dam, another bandmate of Freddy’s (as well as a friend and rival); Brooke, Stu’s long-time girlfriend; Diane, the ex-con junkie who turns up dead just when Amanda wants to ask her some more questions.

Through her investigations, Amanda learns more about her parents’ lives: that her mother loved her father despite his philandering ways; that her father sired at least one half-sibling with another woman; that Stu stole her father’s song and passed it off as his own. Amanda knows her mother didn’t kill Freddy. But if not Carol, who? Stu? Brooke?

But the real surprise comes when Amanda figures out she grew up in the house right next door to her parents’ place, where her father was stabbed to death twenty years earlier. Adding to



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Amanda's shock is the discovery that her adoptive mother, Shelley, was in love with Amanda's dad—and jealous that he wouldn't leave Carol for her. It was Shelley, not Carol, who ultimately killed Freddy. Amanda's mother had spent her life in prison...while her murderous friend escaped suspicion and went on to raise Carol and Freddy's child as a free woman.

Questions for Discussion

1. Early on in the first chapter of *Best Girl*, Amanda observes that people are liars—and she adjusts her expectations accordingly. Do you agree with her belief?
2. Amanda goes over Shelley's head when she seeks work at a Yorkville salon, because she knows it'll be easier to take Shelley's anger after the fact rather than seek her permission beforehand. How is this sometimes true in the real world? Are there times when this strategy should be avoided?
3. Good writing makes use of vivid descriptions, painting pictures for the reader without overwhelming him or her with details. Here's an example of such a description from chapter 1:

Diane showed up at my door, a worn-out woman around forty who must have been pretty once. She wore a rain jacket over her jeans and carried a black canvas tote bag in one hand, her purse in the other. Nice hair—kind of a pageboy dyed chestnut. She stared at me as if she'd seen a ghost.

Why is it more effective to call Diane a worn-out, once-pretty woman than to describe her in detail? How does Amanda's perception of Diane add to your understanding of Amanda herself?

4. Write a list of questions you think Amanda would want to ask her mother, if she were still alive.
5. Randall Webb explains to Amanda that her mother was convicted partly because the jury didn't like her: "She wasn't soft like some women. She came across gutsy, didn't apologize for herself" (chapter 2). As you see it, how is this a liability for women?
6. People accuse Amanda's mother of killing Freddy Allan out of jealousy, because "he couldn't keep it in his pants" (chapter 2). Infidelity is a difficult situation to deal with in a marriage. What do you think? Is monogamy dead?
7. Amanda reels under the revelation that her mother was convicted for killing her father. As Amanda takes the subway to Iggy Bosco's music store, she reflects that it's understandable that Shelley never told her the real story as a child. You've probably heard the expression, "What you don't know won't hurt you." Are we sometimes better off not knowing about some things?
8. In chapter 5, Amanda observes that if you don't care, you don't get hurt. Do you support her stance?
9. A *simile* is a comparison using the words "like" or "as." Authors often use this literary device to enhance a descriptive passage. Near the beginning of chapter 6, the following simile describes a couple guys hanging out near Brooke's place: "They squinted at me like they were inspectors and I was meat." Why does the author use this simile instead of simply saying they stared at Amanda? How does the use of similes add to the way you experience the story?





10. When Amanda meets Brooke for the first time, she senses from Brooke's body language that Stu is forbidden territory: *Her expression changed, the smile suddenly forced.* "When did you talk to Stu?" (chapter 5). How does our ability to understand nonverbal language help guide our interactions?
11. Amanda chooses her knock-off jeans to wear to the lawyer's office in chapter 7. Many of us own fake or forged items such as these. What do you know about contraband? Why do we use it? What are the wider implications of society continuing to support it?
12. Read the last line in chapter 9. How is showing a character's behavior in this way effective in conveying emotion? Find other examples where the author shows the characters' emotions instead of simply stating it.
13. Articulate the struggle within Amanda when she finds out Shelley—the woman who raised her and the only mother she knew—was actually her father's killer.
14. How does Amanda change over the course of this story?
15. Knowing how important a title is, think of a new one for this book.

