

Discussion Guide for *The Murderer's Daughters*

- 1) The book begins with the statement, "*I wasn't surprised when Mama asked me to save her life.*" As readers, we soon learn that Lulu, the narrator of this section, is not able to get help in time to save her mother. How does this impossible failure determine the course of Lulu's life? Why do you think the author chose to begin the narrative with this statement, and how does it shape the reader's response to the violent scene that follows? What does this statement reveal about Lulu's experience as a daughter up to the point of her mother's murder? How does the burden of this expectation determine her choices in life?
- 2) The novel begins with the murder of the main characters' mother by their father, from Lulu's perspective. The narration of the novel then moves back and forth between Merry and Lulu. How do you think this narrative structure allowed you to understand the characters motivations in their different ways of coping with the formative trauma of their childhood?
- 3) What was your response to Merry's need to stay attached to her father, and even emotionally care for him, despite his violence to both herself and her mother? How does Merry's attachment to her father compare to Lulu's need to deny his existence?
- 4) Were you surprised when the Cohen family took in Merry and Lulu? Merry and Lulu have trouble adapting to their foster family, just as their foster family has trouble fully embracing Merry and Lulu. The scene of Thanksgiving was particularly difficult for everyone. What was it like for you, as the reader, to experience this family scene? Did you find yourself judging or sympathizing with anyone in particular? How did it connect to the vision of family presented throughout the novel?
- 5) Both Merry and Lulu choose careers that are related to their early experiences of trauma. The scenes of their respective training, Merry as a victim advocate and Lulu as a doctor, help the reader understand the visceral connection between their early trauma and their professional choices. Do you think that their work lives allow them to create meaning from their suffering, or does it hinder their ability to develop beyond their early experience?
- 6) Lulu considers Merry's inability to be in a long-term romantic relationship the result of Merry's loyalty to their father. Do you think this is accurate? Are you surprised that Merry accepts her father's help when she returns to school? Despite Lulu's judgment of their father, Merry feels a duty towards him. Might there be any positive aspects to her filial loyalty?
- 7) Lulu describes herself as a reluctant mother, and throughout the book she has trouble showing the devotion to motherhood that Drew expects of her. What do you think holds Lulu back from

fully surrendering to her role as a mother? How does your understanding of Lulu as a mother change after her daughters are held hostage in the courthouse?

8) Both Merry's clients and Lulu's patients depend on them to make life-changing choices about their lives. Their own childhood was bleak; where do you think they found the ability to offer such compassion to others? Do you think they would have made the same types of choices, if Ann Cohen had not been their foster mother?

9) The title of the novel, *The Murderer's Daughters*, defines Merry and Lulu by their father's violence. The novel ends soon after Joey is released from jail, and has served his debt to society. Do you think that Merry and Lulu will ever be able to transcend their role as "a murderer's daughter," What would happen to them if they did?

10) What do you think their mother would have wanted for her daughters? Would she have been able to understand their choices about alternately denying and embracing family?