

THE NO.1 BESTSELLER

DERVLA McTIERNAN

WHAT HAPPENED TO NINA?

A good mother protects her son.
No matter what he's done.

Reading Group Notes

WHAT HAPPENED TO NINA?

BY DERVLA McTIERNAN

From the #1 internationally bestselling author of *The Murder Rule* comes an emotional novel of suspense about two families pitted against each other -- one seeking justice in the disappearance of their daughter, the other desperate to clear their son's name.

Nina and Simon are the perfect couple. Young, fun and deeply in love. Until they leave for a weekend at his family's cabin in Vermont, and only Simon comes home.

WHAT HAPPENED TO NINA?

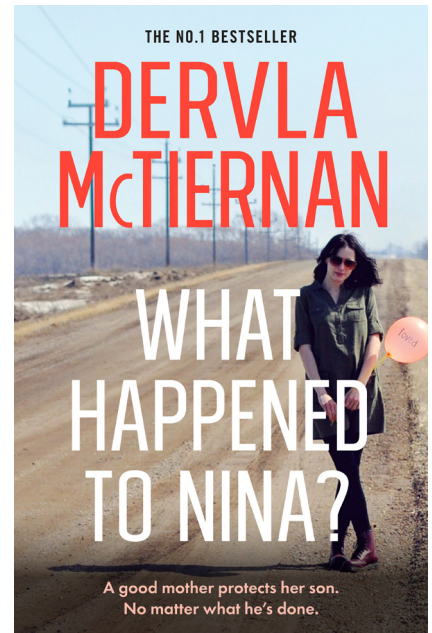
Nobody knows. Simon's explanation about what happened in their last hours together doesn't add up. Nina's parents push the police for answers, and Simon's parents rush to protect him. They hire expensive lawyers and a PR firm that quickly ramps up a vicious, nothing-is-off-limits media campaign.

HOW FAR WILL HIS FAMILY GO TO KEEP HIM SAFE?

Soon, facts are lost in a swirl of accusation and counter-accusation. Everyone chooses a side, and the story goes viral, fuelled by armchair investigators and wild conspiracy theories and illustrated with pretty pictures taken from Nina's social media accounts. Journalists descend on their small Vermont town, followed by a few obsessive 'fans.'

HOW FAR WILL HER FAMILY GO TO GET TO THE TRUTH?

Nina's family is under siege, but they never lose sight of the only thing that really matters - finding their daughter. Out-gunned by Simon's wealthy, powerful family, Nina's parents recognize that if playing by the rules won't get them anywhere, it's time to break them.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Number one internationally bestselling author Dervla McTiernan is the critically acclaimed author of five novels, including *The Murder Rule*, which was a *New York Times* thriller of the year and the bestselling Cormac Reilly Series (*The Ruin*, *The Scholar* and *The Good Turn*). Dervla has won multiple prizes, including a Ned Kelly Award, Davitt Awards, a Barry Award, and an International Thriller Writers Award. Dervla is also the author of four novellas, and her audio novella, *The Sisters*, was a four-week number one bestseller in the United States. *The Daily Mail* referred to her writing as 'glorious storytelling to rival John Grisham' and the *New York Times* has called her 'an uncommonly fine mystery writer.' Dervla lives in Western Australia with her family.

 @dervlamctiernan

 @DervlaMcTiernan

 @DervlaMcTiernan



Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read my book.

When I am the very early days of writing a novel, before the seed of the story has even taken root, I have to first find a reason to write the story. There are a million stories already in the world. For me to set about writing another one, I have to understand why I'm doing it. Why this story, why now?

For me, the answer to that question usually lies in character. If I can find a character I truly care about, someone who feels real to me from the very first pages, then in that emotion I can find something true. Something worth writing about. And powerful emotion is what carries me through the writing of the book. I need something — someone — I'm going to feel just as strongly about when I'm two years into the process. When I'm sitting down, writing this letter to you.

In this story, that character is Nina. If you've read the book, then you'll know that Nina only appears in the opening pages. That was a deliberate choice. I know who Nina is, from the top of her head to the soles of her boots. I know so much about what she thinks and feels, I know about a hundred little events that happened in her life that are never referenced in the book. I could have written chapters about her but I couldn't, because I wanted you to see Nina, to hear her strong voice and to feel her as a real, living, breathing young woman, and then for her to be ... gone. I wanted to feel her absence in the rest of the book, and for you to feel it too, on every page.

I hope I've succeeded. Nina may not be real (though she feels real to me), but she represents the tens of thousands of women worldwide who are killed by their partners or family members every year.

This book is for all the Ninas. And for all the ones left behind.

Dervla McTiernan

November 2023

Discussion Questions

1. Which parent do you identify with most strongly in this book, and why?
2. Do you see any similarities between Leanne and Jamie, or Rory and Andy or do you see them as very different people?
3. What do you make of Jamie and Rory's relationship? Do you think Jamie ever loved Rory? Why is Jamie unaware of Rory's true feelings for her? Is it because of his inability to express them, or is it because of something in her psychological make-up?
4. In the earlier parts of the book, Leanne berates herself for her parenting style, for pushing her girls and trying to toughen them up. She thinks that if she had been warmer and more open, Nina might have come to her with her problems. What do you think about that? Do you think Leanne has any responsibility for what happened to Nina?
5. It's clear from the book that Simon was physically abusing Nina, prior to the events of the prologue. It seems too that he was attempting to control her. Later in the book his behaviour towards Nina's sister, Grace, seems sociopathic, and the security guard at the school tells Mathew Wright that he believed Simon had set up an innocent teammate for theft when he was still in school. Do you think that Simon Jordan is a sociopath? What does using or not using that label mean? Does calling Simon a sociopath make him more, or less frightening? More, or less easy to define or understand?
6. It seems from the book that Rory and Jamie do not know their son very well. Why is this? Do you think Simon showed more signs of his true character that they didn't see?
7. Do you think Simon's character is a result of nature, or nurture? Do you think the way Rory and Jamie behaved toward each other played a part in who Simon became? How responsible are Rory and Jamie for what happened to Nina?



8. People have always had an interest in true crime. Back in the 1670s the jailers at the Old Bailey (London's central criminal court) used to sell first hand accounts (somewhat embellished) of the final speeches of notorious criminals. They were wildly popular, and the more sensational they were, the better. Why do you think there is such an enduring interest in true crime cases?

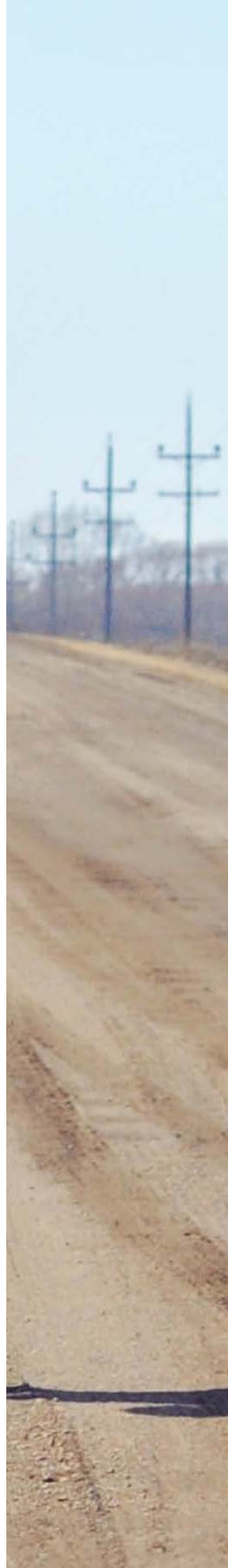
9. In the book, the narrative of Nina's disappearance is manipulated, first by Simon's parents who want to protect him, but also on a micro level by the thousands of people who post and talk about the story, who take sides and set themselves up as experts and quite literally make money on the tragedy, as they use interest in the story to drive engagement in their posts. The higher the engagement, the more clicks and views they receive, the more money they make. This contributes to the 'othering' of Nina and her family, and their dehumanization in the eyes of those who produce and consume the posts and videos. Have you ever seen this play out in real life?

10. The book examines the effect of tribalism, of taking sides. Clearly Leanne and Andy are a team, pitted against Jamie and Rory and vice versa, but equally, as the story of Nina's disappearance goes viral, most people who read about the story are drawn to choosing a side. They either believe Simon, or they don't. And once a person chooses a side, they appear to be attracted to facts that support their belief, and to ignore facts that contradict them. They are more inclined to express stronger opinions, and are more defensive of their position. Have you seen this play out in real life?

11. What is it about human nature that draws us so strongly to choosing a side, even in disputes in which we play no personal part? Does tribalism deliver any benefits for society? What are the negative effects of our tribal instincts? If you agree that people are naturally drawn to tribalism, do you think that instinct can be overcome? If so, how?

12. At the end of the book, Leanne makes a decision. What do you think of her decision? Would you have done the same?

13. Five years after the events of the book, where do you think the characters are in their lives?



Praise for What Happened to Nina?

‘Addictive. Propulsive. Less page-turning than page-devouring. The story builds like a nuclear mushroom cloud. Dervla McTiernan is a thriller master.’ Trent Dalton

‘Her best yet. Completely riveting ... I had at least three gasp-out-loud moments. And that ending! Everyone’s going to be talking about that ending.’
Sally Hepworth, bestselling author of *The Soulmate*

‘McTiernan has crafted an engrossing and shocking story inspired by tragically familiar events. The power and influence of social media makes for a compelling secondary story here and shows how quickly misinformation can spread. Fans will have a tough time putting it down.’ *Booklist*

‘Had me tearing through the pages, even after the ‘who’ of the mystery had been revealed. A great read for fans of Hayley Scrivenor’s *Dirt Town* and Emily Ruskovich’s *Idaho*.’
Books+Publishing

‘McTiernan turns the traditional thriller on its head ... truly haunting.’ *Kirkus* starred review

‘A propulsive and satisfying mystery that tackles head-on themes of wealth, power, domestic violence, and the stories we tell ourselves to justify our worst actions. This is Dervla McTiernan at her finest.’ Tracey Lien, internationally bestselling author of *All That’s Left Unsaid*

‘Gripping ... A smart and unpredictable portrait of how the boundaries between tragedy and entertainment get blurred. It’s a disturbing treat for thriller fans.’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘One of the best thrillers I have ever read. It is an unforgettable and deeply moving read that takes the concept of how far would you go for your child and turns the volume up so high the dial breaks. Dervla McTiernan is a wickedly gifted writer.’ Don Winslow, #1 internationally bestselling author of *The Cartel* and *City on Fire*

‘A stunning masterpiece. Haunting, emotional, fiercely intelligent and absolutely diabolical. I felt like I was living inside this story.’ T.J. Newman, #1 bestselling author of *Falling and Drowning: The Rescue of Flight 1421*





Praise for Dervla McTiernan

‘An uncommonly fine mystery writer’ *New York Times*

‘One of Australia’s best crime writers’ *Better Reading*

‘World-class crime fiction’ Kate Forsyth

‘McTiernan has rocked the crime fiction world’ Candice Fox

‘McTiernan’s in the top rank of crime writers’ Chris Hammer

‘Crime fiction of the highest standard’ Jane Casey

‘McTiernan [is] clearly on a roll’ *The Age*

‘Intelligent and fast-paced’ *Wall Street Journal*

‘A bright star on the Irish crime-writing firmament’
Irish Independent

‘Outstanding’ *Seattle Times*

‘Ian Rankin and Liz Nugent had better make room’ *Big Issue*

‘A born storyteller’ Val McDermid

‘[An] outrageously gifted yarn spinner’ Trent Dalton

‘A simply brilliant writer’ Don Winslow

‘McTiernan leads a new wave of female crime writers’
Sunday Telegraph

‘One of Australian publishing’s great discoveries of recent
years’ *New Daily*

‘One of my favorite writers’ Don Winslow

‘Dervla McTiernan is a gifted writer with a very special way of
telling a story’ Adrian McKinty

‘An outstanding author of crime fiction’ Jeff Popple,
Canberra Weekly

‘Glorious storytelling to rival John Grisham’ *Daily Mail*