

Discussion Questions

What circumstances made it possible for Peg to go look for Maggie?

- *Financial: Peg kept the money from the sale of the house, her bank accounts, and her credit cards separate from Richard's because of his poor credit history.*
- *Work: Peg is near the end of her contract and has everything in order so a sub can fill in for her. A school might be more responsive to this kind of emergency.*
- *Personal: Her own history makes her understand the urgency of the situation. Lizzie's good standing as a student makes it easier to pull her out of school.*

Maggie didn't know about her mother's past before reading the journal.

- **Would she have told her mother about Richard's abuse if she'd known?**

Maybe – personal opinion can be argued either way.

There are parallels between Maggie's story and Peg's.

- **Do daughters tend to follow the same patterns as their mothers?**
- **Does knowing about the mother's experiences make a difference.**

This will depend on personal experience. Counselors often see this kind of pattern emerging, regardless of whether or not the daughter knows about the mother's past experiences.

Maggie reads what Peg wrote as a teenager. Peg tells Lizzie many of the same things.

What differences are there in the two versions of events? Why?

Maggie's reading what Peg wrote at the time. Peg is telling Lizzie what she remembers. She's blocked out parts and sometimes the story becomes the reality.

How does Richard manipulate the relationship between Maggie and Peg?

What does he say and do that make Peg less likely to believe Maggie if she tells?

At the beginning of the relationship, he kept Peg away from the girls a lot. We don't see it in the book, but he was probably telling her repeatedly that the teens were old enough to be on their own as much as they were. Even before the engagement, Peg and the girls were drifting apart.

Then, when Maggie acts out, he builds her "bad girl" persona through repeated dire warnings that there's probably worse that they don't know about – but in a way that makes him seem supportive. He also keeps comparing her to Liz. That infers that it's not Peg's parenting that is the problem; the blame for everything falls on Maggie.

He also makes his phony confession to Peg—we tend to believe the first version of a story more than later ones.

Why does Maggie not tell right away?

She's lied so much, she knows it would be reasonable for Peg to doubt her, and Richard's first moves are so bizarre, they don't sound real. Also, she's just started to mend the relationship with Peg and doesn't want to risk destroying it.

When Maggie first starts reading Peg's journal, she says the omelet reminds her more of her mother than the journal. Why?

Food is a strong sensory stimulus, so it evokes emotion. The journal was written by a teenage Peg that Maggie's never known existed.

What about Lizzie?

- **How has Richard manipulated the relationship between Peg and Lizzie?**
- **Is he setting her up to be the next "bad girl"? How?**

He's taken Lizzie's side in the babysitting issue, making himself her ally against her mother. Yet as the novel goes on, he expresses concern about Maggie's influence on Lizzie repeatedly, so he may be setting her up to be his next victim.

Richard probably knew he'd lose his job. Financially, they'd have been better off if he'd sold his house and moved to the small town to live with Peg and the girls.

What advantages are there for Richard in having them move in with him?

Peg may be keeping her accounts separate, but she's paying Richard's bills. This is a large part of what has her preoccupied in the first chapters. Even if they split, he'd be better off financially this way.

The move isolates Peg and the girls from their old friends and support system. It's probably no surprise he picked a woman with teenage girls and no extended family. Also, you have to wonder what happened to make Peg's computer crash right after the move.

The only neighbors we hear about are the Petersons, a young couple who probably did not live there when Richard had the previous victim living in his house. While it's not addressed in the book, it is likely he was comfortable no neighbor would talk about that. This could happen in a suburb with frequent changes in home ownership and commuters who have little time to socialize with the neighbors.

Why were the girls at high risk of making the "wrong" friends when they moved?

Kids who get into trouble often have difficulty keeping friends and are likely to latch onto anyone new. Kids who are involved in school and other activities are less likely to have time to make friends with the new kid and less likely to need a new friend.

Do you think Peg will tell the girls *everything* about her past now?

If she does, will that make it less or more likely that they'll make the same mistakes?

Opinions may vary.

As a runaway, Maggie finds a lot of people ready to help her, but some, like the photographer, are looking for something in return.

- **Would Charlie eventually want something from her in return for his help?**
- **What about CJ and Joe?**

Charlie would almost certainly want something from her eventually. He uses people. CJ and Joe both make a habit of helping people without asking for a return.

The novel takes place in just over a week. What kinds of events can bring about such dramatic changes so quickly?

Natural disasters, war and criminal violence, death, major accidents, suddenly moving, etc.

Do you think Maggie will recover from her traumas more rapidly than Peg recovered from hers? Why?

Probably. Maggie is going to get counseling and is already processing the events and recognizing (at least intellectually) that what Richard did was not her fault. Peg has always pushed traumatic events out of her memory except to blame herself for whatever happened. She's just beginning to realize how that changed her life.

Maggie is ready to have sex with CJ, but is relieved when it doesn't happen. Peg did let someone use her after the fraternity incident, and there are some hints that she had many relationships before having the girls. Why are people who have been sexually abused more likely to be sexually exploited and/or promiscuous?

If they have blamed themselves, their self-esteem is low, making them a more likely victim. As for all the kids who run away from sexual abuse and end up prostituting themselves, once they've been used that way once, the concept of being used again is less foreign. If they choose the partners, at least they're having some control.

After she reads Maggie's diary, Peg isn't sure whether it's the truth or something Maggie made up. She decides "Either way the answer is the same. Maggie needs our help."

- **Why is she not sure whether the diary is fact or fiction?**

Maggie's behavior and lies make it easier to believe it is fiction.

- **Is it reasonable for her to be uncertain?**

If the diary is fact, she brought the molester into her daughters' lives. That's a lot of guilt to accept, especially for Peg, who blames herself for everything that's gone wrong in her own life.

- **False accusations happen. Why would anyone make up lies like that?**

Attention, revenge, embarrassment if an adult has rejected advances...

- **Are there any reasons Maggie might make up these stories about Richard?**

He's totally uprooted her life. That alone is reason to be angry.

- **Why would Maggie need their help if she'd made it all up?**

She'd need help with the emotions that made her lie about it and she'd need to get home safely.

People who have been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused as children are more likely to end up in abusive relationships as teenagers and adults.

- **Why do you think that happens?**

- **If someone has been abused, what can they do to avoid repeating the pattern?**

There's some research into the chemistry of victimization. Whether it changes the body's chemistry or not, someone who's been victimized once may actually give off unintentional signals to other predators. People who have been abused are more likely to have mannerisms and behaviors that are readily recognized by other abusive people. Often a child has been abused due to the circumstances in which they live, which means it's likely they'll run into other abusive people. They have also been trained to be obedient to adults. Building self-esteem, assertiveness, and confidence can help avoid abusive relationships or at least recognize when a relationship becomes abusive and get out.

If you've also seen the movie, there are major differences in the background and interactions of the characters, and a lot of the action has been moved or otherwise changed. The ending is even different.

- Why do you think they did that?
- Which do you like better/why?

Movies are a visual medium. The book includes passages from Peg's journal and Maggie's diary, as well as a lot of other internal thoughts and feelings. Those are difficult to convey visually with the same depth and clarity as a book.

Movies are expensive to make. The production company asked for revisions to make it more affordable to shoot – combining locations and minor characters, making it shorter, etc.

The relationships among the main characters are complex (and in the book expressed internally a lot of the time); in the brief time a movie takes place, it's important to identify the good and bad guys quickly and clearly.

Having an external reason for Peg to be vulnerable (her financial issues in the movie) makes it easier for the audience to quickly excuse her missing Richard's dark side.

The ending in the book takes place relatively slowly – and there's quite a bit after the crisis as Peg and Maggie re-connect. The movie ending is immediately satisfying for the audience.