



The Girl Below

By Bianca Zander
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Introduction

Suki Piper is a stranger in her hometown. . . .

After ten years in New Zealand, Suki returns to London, to a city that won't let her in. However, a chance visit with Peggy, an old family friend who still lives in the building where she grew up, convinces Suki that there is a way to reconnect with the life she left behind a decade earlier. But the more involved she becomes with Peggy's dysfunctional family, including Peggy's wayward sixteen-year-old grandson, the more Suki finds herself mysteriously slipping back in time to the night of a party her parents threw in their garden more than twenty years ago, when *something* happened in an old, long-unused air-raid shelter. . . .

A breathtaking whirlwind of mystery, transgression, and self-discovery, Bianca Zander's *The Girl Below* is a haunting tale of secrets, human frailty, and dark memory that heralds the arrival of an extraordinary new literary talent. Questions for Discussion

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1. In each chapter of *The Girl Below* we are transported back and forth between memories from Suki's past and the current events of her return to London. Why does this format suit Suki's story? How does it shape the way we understand her character? Did you change your opinion of her and her sometimes questionable choices as you learned more about her past?
2. Even as an adult Suki is terrified of Peggy's statue, Madeline. She nearly turns down the opportunity for housing and work that Pippa offers because she cannot bear to face this inanimate object. What explanation can you find for Suki's fear of this statue? Do her feelings toward Madeline change over the course of the story?
3. Suki is picked on at school and by family friends, but her mother brushes it off as teasing and insists she would have a thicker skin if she had grown up with siblings. How does being bullied shape Suki's character? How does it inform the way she relates to Caleb?
4. The initial incident in the bunker haunts Suki through adulthood, until she is able to somehow redeem the fateful events one strange night in Greece. What do you think happened in the bunker the day after the party? How does each family member's response to the episode reveal more about their character?
5. Although Suki lacks consistency in almost every area of her life, she faithfully writes in her journal every day. Is this writing helping Suki to process her life, or is it keeping her stuck in the past? Have you ever kept a journal? What types of memories do you write about most?
6. Hillary's locket has special significance. Though Suki breaks it as a young child, it repeatedly returns throughout the story in meaningful ways. When is it mentioned by Suki or other characters? What calls Suki's attention to it throughout the story?
7. Caleb seems to only trust Suki and lets his guard down in front of her alone. What do you think Caleb sees in Suki? Do you think he is always attracted to her, or do those feelings grow as the story progresses?
8. When Suki goes to stay with Peggy she is confronted by long-repressed guilt about not caring for her mother more during her battle with cancer. She tells us, "I felt disgusted by her, then ashamed of those feelings, then angry and frustrated at her for not being a normal, healthy mum. Round and round the feelings went, driving me from her bedside." Do you think Hillary understood Suki felt this way? Why do you think she kept the truth of how sick she was from Suki? Do you think it was liberating for Suki to not know as a teenager or did it only add to her guilt?
9. Suki returns to England to find virtually nothing of the life she had left behind ten years prior. What does London actually provide her upon her return? Have you ever arrived in a once familiar place only to find it completely changed? How did you respond?
10. Pippa takes a risk inviting Suki to watch over their home while they travel to Greece. She takes an even greater risk by asking her to care for Caleb. What does Pippa see in Suki that establishes such confidence in her? Would you have been able to take the same risks Pippa does?
11. Suki narrates the story of her life, but is often uncertain about the accuracy of some details. She doesn't seem certain about what happened in the bunker, what the presence is in the attic bedroom, or what exactly she found in Pippa's closet. Do you still trust her as a reliable narrator? What moments, if any, were you uncertain that Suki was telling readers the truth?
12. In Auckland, Suki starts to regularly meet with a therapist named Arthur. During one of their sessions he asks, "Have you always believed in things other people can't see?" From her fervent belief in Santa to the hand in the cupboard, Suki has certainly always been open to the supernatural. Have you ever experienced the inexplicable like Suki does? How do you respond when something strange occurs that seemingly has no reasonable or natural explanation?

13. What role does alcohol play in the lives of these characters? What are the different reasons the characters drink? Who do you think is in control and who do you think is struggling with a real problem?
14. Suki's childhood friend Alana ends their friendship after confronting Suki about her narcissistic tendencies. Do you read Suki's character in the same manner Alana does? Does Suki have a particular problem, or is her selfishness typical of a twenty-something trying to get her life in order?
15. At the close of the story Pippa and Suki share a freeing swim in the warm ocean water and join Pippa's family in a dance with the local townspeople. Drawn together by their mutual loss, Pippa and Suki seem to be starting a true friendship. But Suki now has a secret that must be "taken to the grave." How have the secrets kept in this story protected characters? How have they strained relationships? How do you judge when the truth is best kept a secret in your own life?
16. What does the title *The Girl Below* mean to you? At the close of the story Suki liberates someone from the bunker and believes this act has somehow freed her as well. Do you agree? Why do you think Suki needs to save the girl in order to move on?

About the Author

British-born Bianca Zander has lived in Auckland, New Zealand, for the past two decades. An established journalist, she has written for numerous publications, including *The Listener*, the *Sunday Star-Times*, and the *Dominion Post*. She has produced radio shows and written for film and television, including writing the dramatic short film *The Handover*, which screened in competition at the Chicago Film Festival. Bianca holds an M.A. in creative writing from Victoria University, Wellington. *The Girl Below* is her first novel.