

TRACE OF DOUBT

by

DiAnn Mills

Discussion Questions

1. Shelby Pearce hasn't been in touch with her family since she went to prison fifteen years ago. She notes that she and her sister "were raised with the knowledge of unconditional love, but I learned some deeds were unforgivable." How does Shelby handle her family's estrangement? What justifications does her family make for keeping their distance? If you were in their shoes, would you think Shelby's crime is "unforgivable"?
2. What makes Denton McClure so convinced of Shelby's guilt? What begins to change his mind? When did you realize there was more to Shelby's story?
3. Early in Shelby and Denton's relationship, she asks him: "At the end of your life, what will you have to show for your quest?" How does Denton answer that question? How would Shelby answer it? Do their answers change over the course of the story? Think about your own life. What will you have to show for it?
4. Shelby's presence in Valleysburg creates friction among the townspeople, even within the church. What objections to her are raised? Who comes to her defense? How do you think your church might respond to an ex-con in the congregation?
5. On the way to her family's house, Denton tells Shelby: "People we trust often fail us." Who failed Denton? Who failed Shelby? How do Denton and Shelby reconcile with those people? Has anyone failed you? When is it important to forgive? Is there ever a time a person should just move on from a relationship?

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6. Shelby's niece reminds her that sometimes it's better not to profile other people. Who has the hardest time with prejudging in this story? What lessons can be learned from them?
7. When Denton lands in the hospital and Shelby and a couple retired agents are targeted at a safe house, he asks her how people can believe in a God who allows bad things to happen. What does Shelby say about this? How would you answer Denton's question?
8. Denton has fond memories of his grandmother, especially nights they spent studying the stars in the sky. In what ways was she planting seeds of faith in him? Who else contributes to seeing those seeds sprout? Is there someone in your life you've planted seeds with or watered those seeds for?
9. What reasons does Shelby have for hesitating in starting a romantic relationship with Denton? How might her objections be overcome? What happens in relationships after mistakes are made? Is it always possible to start over or are some mistakes fatal?
10. Clay Pearce asks Shelby: "Ever hear knowledge is horizontal but wisdom is vertical?" What is he trying to communicate to Shelby? What does this maxim mean to you?
11. Clay also reminds Shelby that "sacrifice always has a price." What sacrifice does Shelby pay and what does it cost her? What does she gain through her sacrifice? What have you sacrificed, paid, and gained?
12. By the end of the story, Shelby understands that she can't "right any of Marissa's wrongs—or even my own," but she determines to stop the crimes. Who is the only One who can right our wrongs?