

# Books by the Stack



## **Marlena by Julie Buntin**

Everything about fifteen-year-old Cat's new town in rural Michigan is lonely and off-kilter, until she meets her neighbor, the manic, beautiful, pill-popping Marlena. Within the year, Marlena is dead, drowned in six inches of icy water in the woods nearby. Now, decades later, when a ghost from that pivotal year surfaces unexpectedly, Cat must try to forgive herself and move on.

**Why you'll like it:** *Coming of age. Haunting. Introspective. Lyrical.*

**About the Author:** Julie Buntin is from northern Michigan. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Cosmopolitan*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *Slate*, *Electric Literature*, and *One Teen Story*, among other publications. She teaches fiction at Marymount Manhattan College, and is the Director of Writing Programs at Catapult. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. *Marlena* is her first novel.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Talk about Silver Lake – its poverty, the boredom the area instills in teenagers, its isolation. In what way might its environment contribute to the abuse of drugs and alcohol?
2. How would you describe Cat? In what way is she different from – as well as similar to – Marlena? Consider her relationship to her mother?
3. What about Marlena? How would you describe her character: reckless, adventurous...what else? Talk about Marlena's life with her addict father and her meth-cook of a boyfriend. Was Marlena's addiction inevitable? Then there's Bolt – what's going on there?
4. Although financially Cat's family is in tough straits, Marlena's is in "full-blown" poverty. Yet Cat doesn't pity Marlena. Why not? Does Marlena pity herself? Do you?
5. What is the nature of Cat and Marlena's relationship? How would you describe it? What draws the two girls together? Is the relationship one of equality? In what way does Cat seem both charmed and terrified by Marlena?
6. What does Cat mean when she observes, "If I gave Marlena up, I'd be leaving something important with her forever, something of mine that I'd never get back"?
7. We know early on that Marlena dies. What impact does that foreknowledge have on your reading?
8. Had Marlena not died, would she have made it out as Cat did? Or might she have been unable to free herself from the grip of poverty and addiction?
9. What lasting effects does Marlena and her death have on Cat – both in the immediate aftermath and years later?
10. The novel's section that has Cat living and working in New York allows the author to observe the social scene with precision. How does she portray that urbane world – and Cat's life in it?

- 11.** Are you satisfied with the final revelation surrounding Marlena's death? Why or why not?
- 12.** Which of the book's two sections did you find more engaging? Were you drawn more to the New York or Michigan setting?
- 13.** Have you ever had the kind of friendship that Cat and Marlena had? Have you ever had a friend like Marlena?

*(Questions provided by the litlovers.com)*



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