

READING GROUP GUIDE
for
CAPTIVITY
by Deborah Noyes

by Jenn Northington

SUMMARY

Sisters Maggie, Kate, and Leah Fox turned America on its collective ear in the late 19th century, with their claims of communication with the spirit realm. In *Captivity*, Noyes takes us behind the public personas, the trials and town halls, the zealots and the skeptics, to reveal one of the women at the heart of Spiritualism.

Clara Gill, a reclusive spinster with a tragic past and a 'ghost' of her own, clings tightly to fact and reality. When young Maggie Fox comes to work for her and her aging father, it's an unwelcome intrusion in her already-troubled world. But Maggie's vivacity combined with Clara's curiosity and longing for answers are stronger than her distaste for Maggie's "talent," and the two form an unlikely, lasting friendship. As Maggie's fame grows, Clara begins to venture back into the world, and the two women spiral in and out of each other's lives as they search for certainty in a shifting world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe in ghosts and/or spirits? Have you ever been to a psychic or a medium?
2. While Maggie and Kate appear to rap initially for the fun, and then are co-opted by Leah, all of the sisters are complicit in the hoax. Who is the most guilty of deceit? Who is the most/least sympathetic?
3. Clara Gill, Marianne Pratt, and Maggie Fox are all examples of women struggling to define themselves in a way society generally didn't allow, with varying success. What do you think they'd be/do if they were alive today?
4. Clara's "Uncle" Artemis turns out to be a sinister and disastrous force in her life, while her father is kind but ineffectual. Discuss these two polar opposite examples of male control of women in the late 1800s. What would have been the ideal way for Artemis and/or her father to handle the situation with Will?
5. Did you guess ahead of time that Will was married with children? If so, when, and what gave it away? How does that knowledge affect your opinion of Will?
6. The Fox sisters had a huge impact on American spirituality. Compare to today's Jon Edwards or Sylvia Browne – are they contemporary "rappers"? How do the

modern-day divisions between religion and spirituality compare to those of the 19th century?

7. In late 1888, Maggie told the New York World that the rapping was produced by cracking her toe joints and demonstrated her method in public. She later recanted, but the damage was done and the sisters' careers never recovered. Why do you think she confessed?

8. Clara's "visitation" ultimately allows her to move on from the tragic loss of Will, and at one point in the novel Maggie justifies what she does as providing comfort to those in need. Does the end justify the means in this case? Is it important if the visitations are real or not, as long as they serve a positive purpose?

9. What does Will's message (pg 272) mean?

10. In her interview, author Deborah Noyes talks about the difficulties of writing historical figures versus entirely fictional ones. How much did history inform your reading experience – were the “real” characters like the Foxes more or less convincing than, for example, Clara and Sven?

11. The title, ‘Captivity’, can refer to many different people and situations in the novel. What is the first thing that comes to mind, in retrospect? How did the title shape your reading experience?

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Your novel *Angel and Apostle*, a sequel to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, also digs into early America. Tell us about your fascination with history.

I spent years writing realistic contemporary novels that miscarried fifty pages in because they lacked perspective or passion. I couldn't sustain them. You have to invent a world when you write a novel, or reinvent one, not just hold a mirror to it, and it takes energy and resolve. The present is loud and fast and bright. It hurts my head (and also bores me a little because we keep so few secrets now. We withhold nothing, analyze everything, and have no time or tolerance for mystery). Some writers can work wonders with that, but not me.

Once I got my writing in line with my reading — the books I love most are historical or speculative, or both, and often draw on other story forms ... folklore, myths, fairy tales — I was happy again (and able to actually complete a project). It felt like coming home.

The hard part is knowing when to back out of research and just write. With historical fiction, you have the benefits of scaffolding but restrictions, too, and I learned with *Angel and Apostle* how important it is to reach back with all five senses.

I also learned how to clean a chimney with a live goose, host a turtle frolic, dance the Shepherd's Holy Day, slaughter and dress a pig, and contemplate the erotic potential of bundling.

Layered with human endeavor, suffering, triumph, vanity — the past is like rich dark soil or an old-growth forest. It's a haunted place, and I'm inclined to feel haunted.

Captivity is told from the perspective of two very different women: Clara Gill, a recluse and artist, and Maggie Fox, a medium and genuine historical figure. Tell us about the process of finding their voices. Who came first, Clara or Maggie?

Maggie came first, but I didn't understand her. In many ways, I still don't. She lived a highly documented life (a major inconvenience at times! It's hard enough to get your characters to do what you want them to when they're made up). I took plenty of license with her inner life, but I wanted to do Maggie the honor of respecting the evidence, too.

Clara I understood right away. She's more like me — or who I might be if something terrible happened to change the course of my life. I had only to sit back and let her lead me through her story. It's a sad story, but it's hers, and I had no choice but to respect that.

The novel is peppered with historical persons, such as adventurer Elisha Kane. What was the research process like for these characters? How did it differ from developing those who were wholly fictional?

Their adult lives were well documented, so I had a wealth of facts and details to draw from, which is good and bad.

Good because you have instant texture, background, context. If there are letters or diaries, as in the case of Kane and Leah Fox Underhill (Maggie's older sister and manager, who wrote a memoir called *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*), you even get a sense of their voices.

Bad because you have an embarrassment of riches with a rigid timeline attached. You end up having to excise, add to, and bend history to serve your ends. The end is story, and stories have shape. Real life doesn't, often, and needs improving on. So it was a tug-of-war with the historic figures.

Clara and Will became the heart of the book for me probably because I had no idea where they were leading, or where it would all end up.

What was the most surprising thing you learned while researching *Captivity*?

That apart from Maggie's own late-life confession of fraud, later retracted, the Fox sisters were never officially or satisfactorily discredited.

Despite her growing attachment to Maggie, Clara is skeptical of the Fox sisters' abilities. In the end, though, a "visitation" is the only way she is finally able to let go of her tragic affair with Will. This tension between truth and belief runs through-out the entire novel; was it difficult to find a balance?

It was! As much for Clara as for me, I think. What happens at the end of the book goes against her every instinct, her nature, and it was my job to justify that.

Do you believe in ghosts?

The short answer is no. I'm as empirical as you get. The wonders of the visible world occupy me no end.

The long answer is that I believe in belief. I believe in metaphor and mystery. The mind and imagination are marvelous instruments, and they don't call ghosts metaphysical for nothing. I'm someone who lives in my head a lot, and so the long (frustrating) answer is yes. I believe in ghosts.

Towards the end of the novel, Maggie struggles against a cultural Catch-22: she can't stay respectable for long unless she marries, but can't continue to be a medium if she does. Her struggle speaks to me as well, in that it is difficult even today for women to find a balance between career and family. Was this a deliberate reference on your part? Do you think that a true balance between profession and personal life is possible?

Women had so few options in the 1800s. You married (and married well, with any luck), became a governess, or entered service. So both Clara and Maggie were subversive in their way. I'm drawn to the wayward, to the exception more than the rule. I don't know that we can ever strike a true balance — trying is its own life's work — but I love that you saw this contemporary parallel; it speaks to how we participate in the stories we read, and in so doing extend them, become collaborators.

You mention on your website that, if you had another life to live, you'd be a field biologist. Are Clara's stunted dreams a reflection of your own?

I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be, I think. But that would have been another plausible path — I think of it as a parallel life, the one I didn't choose — one I occasionally wonder about.

It's a good life, this, telling lies for a living. I have no complaints. No regrets.

Clara on the other hand is a case of arrested development, someone who suffered a trauma and just begged out, refused to participate anymore. (Even as I say that, I wonder how much of "life" is lived externally, in the world, reflected in our actions and interactions ... and how much in our heads? The answer won't be the same for everyone.)

You've written for adults (Captivity, Angel and Apostle) and for younger readers (Red Butterfly, Encyclopedia of the End), both fiction and nonfiction. How does your process differ from book to book, and from age group to age group? Which do you prefer? Which is the hardest?

I never think about whom a book's for until it's well underway; I just tell the story that wants to be told. The writing process is more or less identical (research/draft, revise, research, revise, research, revise...), though some projects, nonfiction especially, call for more up-front research than others. It's the editing and production process that varies. Picture books are so collaborative. There are more stages, more creators involved (author, editor, illustrator, designer). They're less time-consuming but harder — for me — to write because you have to distill. You have to load and measure every word. You have to leave out 75% of what you put in and trust someone else to make up the difference with pictures. It's surprising and humbling and very satisfying.

What are you working on next?

A young-adult novel about a doppelganger and plague in 14th-century Florence.