



Middle of the Night

by Riley Sager

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Discussion Questions

1. What did you suspect happened to Billy on the night he disappeared? Did your theories change as you read the book?
2. Do you think Ethan saw what happened to Billy and repressed the memory?
3. Ethan struggles with guilt throughout the story. How do you think this impacts his actions and relationships?
4. Were you surprised when Billy's remains were discovered? Why or why not?
5. Everyone in Hemlock Circle has a secret. Which character's secret did you find most shocking?
6. How did you feel about the suburban setting? Did it add to the story's atmosphere?
7. Did the flashbacks help you understand the characters better, or did they interrupt the pacing?
8. The book hinted at supernatural elements. Did you find these effective, or would you have like them to be explored more?
9. What were your thoughts on the Hawthorne Institute? Did you believe it played a larger role in the story?
10. Who did you think was leaving the baseballs in Ethan's backyard?
11. Were you surprised to learn about Claudia's (Ethan's wife) death? How did her loss shape Ethan's character?
12. Did the reveal of the murderer surprise you?
13. What did you think of the ending with Ethan and Henry?
14. Have you read any other books by Riley Sager? If so, where does Middle Of The Night rank? If not, are you interested in reading more of his novels?
15. If Middle Of The Night was adapted into a movie, which actors would you cast for each character?

Author Interview

NPR's Don Gonyea talks to Todd Ritter — who writes thrillers as Riley Sager — about his new novel, "Middle of the Night." Ritter was a reporter and turned to fiction after layoffs at his newspaper.

DON GONYEA: Summer 1994, a leafy New Jersey suburb - two boys have a sleepover in a backyard tent. Come morning, only one boy wakes in that tent. Author Riley Sager writes, his name is Ethan Marsh. He is 10. And this is the last carefree moment he'll have for the next 30 years. Riley Sager is actually former newspaper reporter Todd Ritter. Ritter, as Sager, has published a bestselling thriller a year since 2017. His latest, "Middle Of The Night," is just out, and Todd Ritter, or should I say Riley Sager, joins us. Hello.

TODD RITTER: Hi. How are you?

DG: I'm good. I'm good. What sets this plot in motion in present day when Ethan returns to his childhood home where that disappearance occurred as an adult?

TR: Yeah, he returns home after a lengthy absence because his best friend vanished there, so he doesn't really have fond memories of the place, but circumstances force him back home. And he starts to notice strange happenings around the neighborhood that make him think that his friend, Billy, who vanished 30 years ago, might have also returned and maybe wants Ethan to help figure out what happened to him. It's a mystery, it's a ghost story, it's a coming-of-age tale kind of all rolled into one.

DG: There's a word that you use, I don't know how many times in the book. It's a scritch (ph) like that. Describe that word and why it keeps coming back like that.

TR: Yeah, he has this recurring dream of the sound of the tent being slashed open. And for Ethan, he does not think he witnessed the tent being slashed open or Billy being taken. But this dream kind of makes him think, did I see something? Did I hear something? Is this recurring dream a memory? What is going on here?

DG: This book is set in suburbia on a cul-de-sac called Hemlock Circle. These places, I think, to a lot of us, feel both familiar and frightening at the same time.

TR: Yeah, I am a suburbanite myself. I happen to live on a cul-de-sac in Princeton, N.J., where Ethan lives. I just liked the idea of writing about a place that everyone thinks is so safe and so quiet and nothing bad ever happens and then look at the fallout when something does happen.

DG: You also capture a certain claustrophobic vibe. And then, I guess, just for kicks, the place is surrounded by pretty deep woods.

TR: In my books, there's always a deep woods. Usually, there's always a deep, scary woods lurking in the background. But, yeah, this cul-de-sac is a very insular neighborhood. They're set off from the rest of the development. They're kind of a land unto themselves. They're in everyone's business. Everyone knows stuff about each other, but also everyone does have a secret.

DG: One thing you do is you take mundane objects - a baseball turning up on a patch of lawn, a motion sensor that triggers security lights turning on, going off, maybe one by one down the street in the middle of the night. What is it about these objects and how you use them?

TR: Well, this actually happened to me. One night, I couldn't sleep, and I was looking out my bedroom window, which has a view of the entire cul-de-sac. And one of the motion-triggered security lights over my neighbor's garage flicked on. And there was nothing in the driveway that I could see that would have activated it. And I thought, oh, that's very weird. The light went out, and then it went on at the next house. And I thought, that's really weird. And then it did it again at the next house. And at that point, I just thought, oh, there's a ghost on the cul-de-sac. That's going to be the only explanation for this. And I don't think it really was a ghost. It was probably bats or bugs, but it got my brain working, my writer's brain. And I just thought it was very chilling and spooky.

DG: You worked for years as a reporter at the New Jersey Star-Ledger. I wonder, how have you drawn on your career as a journalist in your thrillers?

TR: I don't really use journalism in my books at all. Occasionally, there is a reporter because in my books, there's lots of crime, lots of mysteries, and, you know, reporters are drawn to that like flies. But what I took away from working in journalism was just the work ethic. In newspapers, you have a deadline. You have to meet that deadline. You have to write for clarity. You can't be obtuse. And so all these great lessons that I learned while working at newspapers I use now in my novel writing.

DG: You're hitting deadlines. You're doing research. You're doing the things reporters do.

TR: Exactly, except I'm just writing stuff that I made up. Yeah.

DG: We've been talking to Todd Ritter, who writes as Riley Sager. His new thriller is called "Middle Of The Night." Thank you so much for talking to us.

TR: Thank you very much.

Author Biography

Riley Sager is the New York Times bestselling author of nine novels, most recently *Middle of the Night* and *The Only One Left*. His novels have been published in over 35 countries, with more than 3 million copies sold worldwide. His latest book, *With a Vengeance*, will be published in June by Dutton Books.

A native of Pennsylvania, he now lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

Reviews

Bestseller Sager (*The Only One Left*) expertly doles out chills and pathos in his mesmerizing latest. In 1994, when Ethan Marsh was 10 years old, his best friend, Billy Barringer, was kidnapped from the tent where both boys were sleeping in Ethan's New Jersey backyard and never seen again. Thirty years later, Ethan's marriage has ended, his parents have decamped to Florida, and he's returned to live on the well-to-do cul-de-sac where he grew up. Still plagued by nightmares about Billy's disappearance, Ethan comes to believe that someone may be lurking in the shadows of Hemlock Circle: neighbors' motion-sensor lights flick on for no apparent reason; he senses a presence "linger[ing] in the way certain smells do" when he's out for night walks. His paranoia increases when someone tosses a baseball into his yard, the private signal Billy used to give him when he wanted to play. Could Billy have returned? Or is his kidnapper back for seconds? Sager takes his time ratcheting up the tension, peppering in crucial flashbacks that flesh out Ethan and Billy's friendship and painting a three-dimensional portrait of Ethan's fractured mind in the present. This standout work of psychological suspense confirms that Sager has few equals when it comes to merging creepiness and compassion.