

I'll Be Gone in the Dark Discussion Questions

by Michelle McNamara

Author Bio: (Lit Lovers & Wikipedia)

Michelle McNamara was an American freelance writer and crime blogger. She was the author of **I'll Be Gone in the Dark: One Woman's Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer**, a true crime book about the Golden State Killer. The book was released posthumously in February 2018 and is being adapted as an HBO documentary series. McNamara died April 21, 2016.



On April 25, 2018, two months after the book's release, Californian authorities arrested Joseph James DeAngelo as the alleged Golden State Killer. Her husband, Patton Oswalt, believes that authorities' use of the appellation, "Golden State Killer," indicates the "impact" of McNamara's book.

People/Characters:

- **Claude Snelling** – (1975) – Murder victim
- **Sheila** – (1976) – Rape victim – Thinks she was followed/stalked before the attack.
- **Jane Carson** – (1976) – Rape victim
- **Fiona Williams** – (1977) – Rape victim
- **Kathy** – (1978) – Rape victim
- **Esther McDonald** – (1978) – Rape victim
- **Katie & Brian Maggiore** – (1978) – Murder victims
- **Debra Alexandria Manning & Robert Offerman** – (1979) – Murder victims
- **Charlene & Lyman Smith** – (1980) – Murder victims
- **Patrice & Keith Harrington** – (1980) – Murder victims. Beaten and killed with a brass sprinkler head. Both had ligature marks. Keith was killed first. Patty was raped.
- **Manuela Witthuhn** – (1981) – Murder victim. Raped and then beaten to death with a lamp. Husband, David, was in the hospital for an unrelated illness. Brother-in-Law, Drew.
- **Cheri Domingo & Gregory Sanchez** – (1981) – Murder victims
- **Janelle Cruz** – (1986) – Murder victim

- **Investigators**
 - **Sacramento County Sheriff Department:** Investigator Jim Bevins, Detective Ken Clark, Detective Carol Daly, Detective Richard Shelby
 - **Contra Costa County Sheriff Department:** Detective Larry Crompton, Criminalist Paul Holes, Chief John Murdock
 - **Visalia Police Department:** Detective Bill McGowen

- **Orange County:** Criminalist Mary Hong, Investigator Erika Hutchcraft, Investigator Larry Pool, Criminalist Jim White, Detective Fred Ray
- **Golden State Killer** – Responsible for at 50 sexual assaults and at least 10 murders throughout Northern and Southern California. (5 jurisdictions) Active for nearly 40 years. First known as the East Area Rapist (EAR).
- **Michelle McNamara** – True crime blogger. Author. Married to Patton Oswald. Daughter, Alice.
- **Paul Haynes** – “The Kid” – Internet researcher who frequently posted on the Golden State Killer Internet boards. Helped finish McNamara’s book after her death.
- **Paul Holes** - An investigator for the Contra Costa County district attorney’s office worked closely with McNamara on her research.
- **Billy Jensen** – Acclaimed investigative journalist. Helped finish McNamara’s book after her death.
- **Kathleen Lombardo** – Michelle’s neighbor who was murdered while jogging when Michelle was a 14 (in 1984). The crime was never solved.
- **Patton Oswald** – Actor. Michelle’s husband. Daughter, Alice. Helped finish McNamara’s book after her death.
- **Investigator Larry Pool** – Investigator in the Countywide Unsolved Crimes Unit. (CLUE). Helped link the Ventura crimes to the Orange County crimes.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Had you heard of the East Area Rapist or the Golden State Killer before reading this book? If so, did this change your perspective at all? How?
3. McNamara goes back and forth in the timeline of the attacks - what purpose did this serve in her storytelling? Did you mind it?
4. Michelle writes about an incident in her own neighborhood in Los Angeles, when her neighbor’s house was robbed. "We make well-intentioned promises of protection we can't always keep. I'll look out for you." Do you think we, as a society, have lost a sense of neighborliness? What factors do you attribute to this loss? How have changes in technology, economics, architecture—house and planned community designs—impacted you, your neighborhood, and society? Is there a remedy to bring us closer together?
5. McNamara diverts from writing solely about serial killers and rapists to give a more personal narrative. Did you find this to be a nice respite or a distraction?
6. In following Michelle’s search to unmask the GSK, what did you learn about her and the kind of person she is? Meeting Michelle in these pages, does she fit with your "profile" of a true crime obsessive?
7. Michelle writes, "Sacramento was not an isolated problem. US crime rates show a steady rise in violent crime throughout the 1960s and '70s, peaking in 1980." The term "serial killer" was coined in the 1970s. Why do you think so many of these serial offenders surfaced at this time?

8. With so many attacks taking place in such a small area, do you think the East Area Rapist lived in one of those neighborhoods? Why do you think he chose the houses he targeted? How do you think the geography of those subdivisions contributed to his attacks?
9. What does Michelle tell us about the way crimes are investigated? What did you learn about the professionals who investigate them? What, if anything, might have helped them in their search for the GSK? How has technology improved their ability to share information? Has it in any way made solving crime more difficult?
10. **I'll Be Gone in the Dark** is a living testament not only to Michelle McNamara and her unwavering commitment to this story, but to the law enforcement professionals who have pursued him. What are your impressions of the detectives? Did you find yourself judging them for failing to capture GSK for 30 years?
11. In the book, Michelle reflects on the similarity between criminals like GSK and the people hunting them. "What I don't mention is the uneasy realization I've had about how much our frenetic searching mirrors the compulsive behavior—the trampled flowerbeds, scratch marks on window screens, crank calls—of the one we seek." Are there other shared characteristics between these two different kinds of hunters?
12. Many people have investigated this case, from police detectives to amateurs. What made the GSK case so difficult to solve? His crime spree seems to have stopped in 1986. Do you have a theory that explains why he suddenly disappeared?
13. One of the many tragic things about this book is that some of it had to be completed after the author's death. It's pretty clear which parts these are, but what were the main differences of the narrative style between the writers? What do you imagine being the challenges of writing in someone else's voice?
14. Some of the descriptions of the attacks were pretty difficult to read. Did you find these parts more or less upsetting than consuming similar content via novel, television, or podcast?
15. Did you find yourself behaving differently after reading how some of these attacks occurred - perhaps by being more observant/nervous?
16. The book barely has a chapter on Joseph James DeAngelo, the man who was eventually identified as the Golden State Killer. Why do you think the final authors did not say more about him? Was that decision understandable?
17. Joseph James DeAngelo was eventually identified as the Golden State Killer because investigators input his DNA into a genealogy website and identified family members through the matches. What do you think of that? Is it an ethical use of a civilian product? Should police be able to use private resources like that in cases like GSK? Should exceptions be made? Jurassic Park said, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should." How does that quote apply to this situation?
18. What impact do unsolved true-crime books have on readers? If the reader cannot know who the villain is, why read them?

19. Novelist Gillian Flynn wrote the introduction to the book. How are crime novelists and true crime writers alike, and how do they differ? Do you read crime novels? If so, what draws you to them? How does the experience of reading a crime novel compare to reading a true crime account? What emotions do each elicit?
20. Will you read more true crime/unsolved mystery books?

References:

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- Just Us Gals – <https://www.justusgalsbos.com/blog/2018/3/30/book-club-discussion-questions-for-ill-be-gone-in-the-dark-by-michelle-mcnamara>
- Lit Lovers – <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/non-fiction/11338-ill-be-gone-in-the-dark-mcnamara?start=3>
- The Line Up – <https://the-line-up.com/books-like-ill-be-gone-in-the-dark>
- True Crime Diary – <http://truecrimediary.com/index.cfm>
- Wikipedia – Joseph James DeAngelo – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_James_DeAngelo
- Wikipedia – Michelle McNamara – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelle_McNamara

If you liked I'll Be Gone In the Dark, try...

- The Red Parts – Maggie Nelson
 - Case Files of the East Area Rapist / Golden State Killer – Kat Winters & Keith Komos
 - Forensics: What Bugs, Burns, Prints, DNA and More Tell Us About Crime – Val McDermid
 - The Fact of a Body: A Murder and a Memoir – Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich
 - Accused – Amber Hunt and Amanda Rossmann
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