

# The Book of Bright Ideas

by Sandra Kring

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## About the Book

Wisconsin, 1961. Evelyn "Button" Peters is nine the summer Winnalee and her fiery-spirited older sister, Freeda, blow into her small town—and from the moment she sees them, Button knows this will be a summer unlike any other.

Much to her mother's dismay, Button is fascinated by the Malone sisters, especially Winnalee, a feisty scrap of a thing who carries around a shiny silver urn containing her mother's ashes and a tome she calls "The Book of Bright Ideas." It is here, Winnalee tells Button, that she records everything she learns: her answers to the mysteries of life. But sometimes those mysteries conceal a truth better left buried. And when a devastating secret is suddenly revealed, dividing loyalties and uprooting lives, no one—from Winnalee and her sister to Button and her family—will ever be the same.

## Discussion Guide

Sandra Kring's debut novel, *Carry Me Home*, captured the hearts and imaginations of readers coast to coast. With *The Book of Bright Ideas*, Kring brings us another storytelling triumph, transporting us to the summer of 1961, when two little girls formed one very special friendship.

In small-town Wisconsin, nine-year-old Evelyn "Button" Peters makes fast friends with newcomer Winnalee Malone. Under the care of her lively older sister, Winnalee is no ordinary child. She totes around a shiny silver urn containing her mother's ashes, and her other prized possession is a tome she calls "The Book of Bright Ideas," filled with real-world wisdom she has gleaned through heart-wrenching life experiences. Yet Winnalee has much to teach Button about having fun, hunting for fairies, and outsmarting grown-ups. It's soon clear this will be a summer unlike any other—a fact that dismays Button's prim mother. Before long, new questions have arisen about the Malone sisters and their previous life on the run. When the answers yield devastating revelations, children and adults alike will question the truths they held dear, and the difference between dangerous lies and comforting make-believe.

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your reading of Sandra Kring's **The Book of Bright Ideas**. We hope they will enrich your experience of this unforgettable novel.

1. How did your perceptions of Freeda change from the beginning of the novel to the end? Is there someone in your life with whom you formed an unexpected alliance? What are the best ways to tell whether a new acquaintance should have a place in your life?
2. What is the effect of reading this novel from Button's point of view? What does her voice tell us about her? What is her storytelling style like? In what ways is she wiser than most of the adults in the novel? What would have been lost if *The Book of Bright Ideas* had been narrated by an adult?
3. Bright Idea number eighty-four, which closes Chapter Two, states that "when you go through a new town that doesn't look like much, stop anyway, because you just might find a new friend waiting there." Discuss the circumstances and chances that bring Button and Winnalee together. Was Winnalee lucky or unlucky to encounter Verdella at The Corner Store?
4. What is the root of Jewel's perfectionism? Would her relationship with her daughter and husband have deteriorated further without Freeda's intervention?
5. Chapter Four features Verdella's recitation of William Butler Yeats's poem "The Stolen Child." Reread the lines, now knowing the title of the poem, and discuss it in the context of the way the novel unfolds.
6. What does Freeda help Button's family confront in Chapter Eleven? Why was it so difficult for them to face these concerns previously? What is at the heart of most insecurities?
7. What is the significance of the author's decision to set the novel in 1961? How does time period affect the plot and various elements of the backdrop?from music to mannerisms? What are your own associations with the early 1960s?
8. What mothering skills do Freeda, Jewel, and Verdella each possess? What did they need to learn about nurturing themselves?
9. As she confronts her anxieties about driving in Chapter Nineteen, Verdella tells Button that the road trip will at last bring her redemption. What does she mean by this? What other forms of redemption take place in the novel?
10. How did you react when you discovered the truth about the Malones? In the end, did Freeda do the right thing?
11. Has Freeda recovered from her childhood trauma? Can she do anything to improve the way she perceives men? How does she perceive sex and power?
12. In the novel's closing pages, Button considers why Winnalee was determined to find the fairies; she wonders whether they were related to Winnalee's unspoken suspicion that lies lurked in her past. What is your understanding of Winnalee's quest?

13. What do you predict for Winnalee's and Freeda's life after the summer of 1961?

14. Which of Winnalee's bright ideas was your favorite? What bright ideas could you compose based on recent events in your life?

15. What was the most memorable summer of your childhood? Have you stayed in touch with the friends from that chapter? What determines which friends we know for a lifetime, and which ones fade from contact?

16. What parallels exist between **The Book of Bright Ideas** and *Carry Me Home*? What common ground would Earwig and Button have found if they had been friends?

## Author Bio

SANDRA KRING lives in the north woods of Wisconsin. She runs support groups and workshops for adult survivors of trauma. Her debut novel, *Carry Me Home*, was a Book Sense Notable pick and a 2005 Midwest Booksellers' Choice Award nominee.

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