“In Where No Gods Came, Sheila O’Connor fearlessly takes us inside a family long past the breaking point, reminding us of the power of love, the pain of separation, and introducing me to one of the most compelling young women I’ve met in a long time. Resilient, vulnerable and with a heart as big as they come, Faina McCoy will break your heart. I didn’t want her story to end.”

—David Haynes

“This is a beautifully written story about the ways in which people find the strength to move on—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Long after the last page is turned, you’ll find yourself thinking about the people who have graced them. Faina’s strength stays with me.”

—Jacqueline Woodson

“Sheila O’Connor’s beautifully readable novel about young girls living close to the precipice is truthful, tough, and filled with delicate hope. She shows how we all survive by inches, by grace.”

—Maureen Gibbon

“The various voices ring true. Ms. O’Connor writes of family and love and loss and youth at risk and hard-earned pleasure; she does so with a noticing eye and tone-perfect ear.”

—Nicholas Delbanco

“For a single mother of three, and a writer who reads countless books a year, to stay up most of the night to finish a novel means it must be a heck of a story: and Sheila O’Connor’s novel was, so compelling in the landscape of urban hardscrabble Minneapolis, and the interior horizons of a damaged mother and her two daughters trying to build their own fable of a family. Fervent and despairing and truth-hard, this novel kept me spellbound, hurtling toward a hoped-for redemption.”

—Susan Straight
1. Four first person narrators tell the story. In an interview the author said, “What interests me most about fiction is the ability to see something from multiple sets of hearts and eyes and minds. I wanted to hear everybody’s version.” How did the multiple storytellers affect you as a reader? Were there narrators you trusted more than others? Why? What does the structure reveal about family secrets and lies? Did you gain empathy for each character by hearing their story?

2. Although Faina’s father, Bobby, isn’t an ideal father, he serves as a source of love and strength. Do his character defects outweigh his virtues?

3. After the night Faina wakes to Lenore vomiting, her attitude toward her mother changes. How does that event serve as a turning point? What does Faina’s transformation tell us about children in alcoholic homes?

4. What is the nature of Lenore’s illness? Why does Cammy tell Faina, “She’s sick all right. But not in the way she wants you to think?” Is Lenore’s illness physical? Does she suffer from a mental illness in addition to alcoholism?

5. Discuss the influence of Papa Roy. Why does he continue to be a presence even in his absence? In what way did he shape Cammy and Lenore’s life? Was he truly wealthy? What are Lenore’s economic circumstances now?

6. Bobby’s paternity is in question throughout the book. Is he Faina’s biological father? Does it matter? Why doesn’t Cammy ever tell Faina her version of that story? Is her secrecy selfish or self-serving?

7. Cammy wants to initiate Faina into street life. Do you believe her motives when she says: “I tried to teach Faina the things she might need. She was book smart in a worthless way. . . .” Compare that to her statement a short time later: “Faina was useful. I saw that immediately.” Are Cammy’s desires at odds? If so, how and why?

8. Why do the teachers and students at Cathedral dislike Faina so intensely? What is the basis for their disdain? Religion? Class? Appearance? Are the reasons the same for everyone? Is their disdain justified?

9. What triggers the brutal attack in the graveyard? Why does Tom Payne’s violence escalate from spitting on Faina to brutally beating her? Is Emmy Atwood correct when she tells Faina, “You bring it on yourself”?

10. Faina takes pride in her gift for story telling. How is that gift necessary for her survival? Does it also contribute to her family’s demise?

11. Why does Cammy seduce Jimmy? Does Cammy’s betrayal have consequences for Jimmy or Faina? Why doesn’t Cammy ever tell Faina the truth about Jimmy?

12. Jimmy Cordova’s character challenges social stereotypes of juvenile offenders. What are his attributes? What does he teach us about integrity and friendship?

13. Secrets and lies are central conflicts in the novel. Do you agree with Mrs. LaJoy when she tells Faina: “If only you told us things would have been different for you.” Would truth telling have altered the family’s fate? How?

14. The story is set in 1974. How would the story be different if it took place in the present?

15. Faina McCoy is a remarkably resilient child. What factors contribute to her resiliency? Early in the book she says, “I’m a tough kid who can survive anything.” Would you agree or disagree with her assessment? Where does she get her strength?